

# 月花の歌姫と 魔我の王



イラスト  
大場陽炎  
超田大介

# Gekka no Utahime to Magi no Ou : Volume 1

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マリア・ハイライン

科学技術の力を背景に勢力を増した新興貴族のお嬢様。  
主人公ライルの幼なじみであり、積極的に好意を寄せている。

「ん？何？見惚れちゃった？」  
「ふうん？ま、そういう事しておくわ」

月花の歌姫と  
魔技の王

**Maria:** “Hm? What is it? Did you fall for me?”

**Maria:** “Oh? Well, let’s just leave it at that.”

**Maria Highline-**

A noblewoman belonging to a family of rising nobility which rose to power due to their background in science and technology. She has known the protagonist Lyle since they were children, and is assertive with her goodwill towards him.





**Vilhelm:** “Well then—Lyle. I’ll ask you once more. Will you lend me your strength?”

**Lyle:** “What do you want this time!”

### **Lyle Waldstein-**

The disciple of «The Last Hexe», Erllua Azoth. Although he has displayed immense talent in the fields of both magic and science, he is still searching for a way to put those powers to good use.

### **Vilhelm Zest-**

The young prodigy who has succeeded the Zest noble family even while being a student. Vilhelm regards Lyle’s abilities as being of great worth, and as such plans to take control of him.



ルーナリア・D・ネブラブルート

生まれつき強大な魔力を持つ幻想種(夜魔の血族)のお姫様。  
偶然街でライルに助けられ、秘書としてライルに仕えることになる。

「……ライル様が、  
私の新しい所有者ではないのですか？」

**Lunaria:** “…… Master Lyle, are you not my new owner?”

**Lunaria D. Nebulablut-**

A princess of the «Nosferatu», one of the Phantasms, born possessing massive amounts of magical power. She was saved by Lyle in a chance meeting, and ended up being employed as his assistant.

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## Prologue – The Last Hexe

She introduced herself as «The Last Hexe»<sup>1</sup> to me.

She was clad in black clothes like those worn at a funeral and had dull grey hair that looked as though it were covered by ashes. Within her eyes dwelled mystery, and she certainly looked the part of a 'witch'. However, she was a surprisingly sociable and friendly person.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lyle Waldstein."

Upon my grasping of her outstretched hand, the «Hexe» was all smiles, and my anxiety all but vanished.

And to Erl—of course, the «Hexe» had a real name and also a pet name—

"Are you really a witch?"

I asked.

Erl did not live in a dwelling deep in the forest but rather in a mansion out in the open, widely exposed to the sun. The people that worked there had never seen any fiels<sup>2</sup> or automata<sup>3</sup> like those from the fairy-tales of the past. At that time, I did not know the reason why «The Last Hexe» was known as a *rare prodigal scientist*. To the childishly innocent me, Erl had said,

"Well, well, what should I say? The 'answer' is not something that is given, but earned, don't you know?"

while smiling in delight.

I had immediately went about exploring the mansion. I could find nothing, to which Erl smiled, and I doubled my efforts in my search for the answer.

It ought to have taken about a month. I discovered a hidden door and a staircase to the basement.

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<sup>1</sup> Hexe means 'witch', in German. To be exact the author used 'Hex' (not in furigana, it's written right at the end of the book), but I took the liberty of correcting it.

<sup>2</sup> Faeries, basically.

<sup>3</sup> Moving puppets, similar kinds of existences.



Carrying a lamp, I entered the basement, and promptly shouted for joy. There was the 'witch's room', the existence of which I had both been skeptical of and was eagerly anticipating, where glass specimen containers and old books were piled up.

And, on top of the table was, that which was considered to be the origin of magic, the mysterious magical stone—[Amber].

Taking one of the amber stones, I raised it over my head... but, nothing happened. No flames, not even a faint light, was given off.

Avoiding detection, I stayed inside the hidden room. Parchment scrolls, handwritten ancient documents, Erl's research notes, I read everything systemically and analytically, deciphering their codes.

One month later, I succeeded in drawing out the magical power of the amber.

Up until now, I still clearly remember the dusk-coloured light that the amber had given off during its magical excitation.

"Lyle..... you..."

Turning my head towards the source of the sound, I saw Erl's face covered in surprise and shock.

"Even though he's just a six or seven year old kid, to have even cracked the code about the magical power of amber... Is he what they call a genius?"

From that day onwards, Erl had made me call her 'Master'. She may have been a strict one, but when I did a good job in learning what she taught, she would gently stroke my head and smile.

Her smile made me happy, and I grew more and more absorbed into studying magic.

"But, you know."

To the me who had openly become a 'witch's disciple', Erl, while making what others would see as a sarcastic smile, had said,

"This sort of magic has already been outdated for a very long time. Now, it is simply waiting to disappear."

Having said that, she brought me to her 'workplace'.

Her workplace was a large workshop, filled with pipes everywhere, and steam was leaking from the openings of said pipes.

"Look. Those are the mechanisms that changed the world."

Inside the workshop was a gigantic furnace constructed with heavy steel. A strong yellowish, dusk coloured flame was burning brightly inside the furnace with a rumbling sound.

Strong, sturdy men were shovelling low purity amber that had been piled up in a mountain into the mouth of the furnace. The fires burned with greater intensity, and the pipes connected to the furnace leaked steam while vibrating.

"This is the [Amber Reactor]. In order to power the steam engine, it produces large amounts of indispensable thermal energy, and is the driving force behind the current <Steam Engine Revolution>. I thought of this idea half a century ago. —Now, do you understand the advantage of adding a steam engine to the Amber Reactor?"

"... Having nothing to do with an individual's disposition, and being able to freely make practical use of large amounts of energy..."

Different from magic which was subject to the user's individual nature and preferences and then altered to fit, the steam engine was purely a machine to the bitter end—the same kind as wagons and water wheels. Anyone could operate it as long as they studied the correct operating method.

"I see.... the energy of the amber which can only be tapped upon by only a few humans, the 'magi', is used as 'fuel' in a method available to everyone—a reproducible technology. To be precise, 'science'."

And just like that, Erl started teaching me about science.

Science was a systematic enterprise, and that meant it was something like the factorisation of the world.

Under the tutelage of the prodigal scientist with the fearsome title of a «Hexe», I was thrown into the world of scientific knowledge; of physics, chemistry, biology and others. With wonder and delight, I studied.

... And at the same time, Erl revealed her hidden fears.

"To think that I'm actually changing the world, the idea of that is pretty frightening. Why did I invent something so strange, I wonder?"

«The Last Hexe», who had ended the age of magic through science, had spoke of her true feelings in that manner.

"You too are a part of this, Lyle."

Turning over the pages of the report written by the me who had turned thirteen, Erl had said that as though she were making a prediction.

"—Should you ever want to, you will leave the name of Lyle Waldstein in history. You possess 'power'. Depending on the circumstances, you have a 'power' greater than either military might or magical strength. That is why, Lyle, I ask you this—Do you have it? The determination to change the world?The determination to prevent change to the world?"

.... A year after asking that question, Erl—Erllua Azoth, leaving me with nothing but a ton of difficult questions and a single pocket watch, vanished.

### Chapter 1 - Disciple of the Last Hexe

#### Part 1

Lyle Waldstein woke up to the annoying chirping of birds.

He was on the laboratory's sofa. Pushing aside the research papers that were covering his face, his eyes were assailed by the morning sun, which the curtains could not block out.

"Ugh....."

Running his hand through his steel-coloured, albeit bed hair afflicted hair, he then rubbed his childlike face that was unlike that of a sixteen year old.

Noticing that he was not wearing his glasses, he fumbled about his immediate surroundings, searching with half-awake eyes.

"Nnn... my glasses, glasses....."

Upon expanding his search area, his outstretched hand came into contact with something tender and soft in the vicinity of his solar plexus.

Wondering what exactly it was, he groped around with his hand, and that soft something changed its shape gently in the middle of his palm.

"Nnnya..... aahn....."

*Was that a bird? They're making some pretty strange sounds today.*

*But still, what is this object with such a remarkable elasticity coefficient?*

As Lyle reaffirmed the feeling of that soft something with his hands by opening and closing his palm,

"Nnh... no... oh, Lyle..."

*The birds today sure are making some really weird sounds. They're even calling out my name, did a parrot from the southern archipelago get mixed up here or what—*

".....Mmm?"

At last, Lyle became fully awake, and he opened his eyes.

Even with his shortsightedness, Lyle could tell that before him was hair of a beautiful copper colour, adorning an even more beautiful face. A slender face, with delicate features. Her well-featured face, and the subtle sensuousness of her cherry lips were vividly engraved in his sight.

"Wh— Ma—"

Lyle's body stiffened in surprise.

Of course, Lyle's hand had already grabbed firmly onto that soft something.

"Hah, mm.... mm, Lyle ~"

Stretching inside the blanket, the girl pressed her soft body on top of Lyle.

Lyle looked as though he was about to scream—and he suppressed the urge to do so, after mustering all his self-control.

Discreetly removing his right hand in which the feeling of that soft something still lingered and had been thrust into the blanket covering the girl, he then extended his hand at the girl's blissful looking sleeping face—

"Mm..... nya? Nanyanyanayaya?"

Having her nose pinched mercilessly, the girl flailed her limbs about, sending the blanket flying. The girl who had been unreasonably roused from her sleep blinked her jade green eyes, looking at Lyle's face, and elegantly—while still having her nose pinched—smiled.

"Gfffmghning, fuaafuu."

"Good morning, Maria."

Releasing his fingers from pinching her nose, Lyle got up from the sofa. Folding his arms and looking at the girl's face—and just her face, he raised his eyebrows in a frown.



"..... Although this is already the sixtieth time..... please don't get naked while in the company of others."

"I'm not naked, y'know?"

The girl with hair the colour of copper—Maria, saying that, crossed her legs while sitting on the sofa.

Indeed, she was wearing black garter stockings and silk undergarments, but the exposure of that was, on the contrary, even more seductive.

"Stop being so shameless already!"

"Lyle, be that as it may, aren't you also partially responsible? You see, because the laboratory door wasn't locked, I couldn't help but think that it was an invitation!"

Laughing out loud, Maria shrugged her shoulders, sending those abundantly developed twin hills of hers shaking.

Before he realised it, his gaze had fallen there. Noticing that, Lyle corrected his gaze in a panic.

".... Certainly, if I were to consider your personality, it might have been careless of me to have not locked the door."

"Aren't I right?"

"But even if it's a joke, you are still a viscount's daughter, aren't you? You ought to be more modest..."

"Pfft. Isn't 'Viscount Highline' just something that was bought with money? For a noble whose title was bought, even if I conduct myself with modesty, only malicious gossip is going to be spread about me anyway."

Maria's eyes that were long slits flickered sharply, and she brushed her long copper hair upwards. She was easy-going and rough, but somehow also elegant.

For the bourgeoisie who had obtained wealth from the <Steam Engine Revolution>, there would be many of whom would want to buy the Viscount title that anyone would recognise. The Highline family, was one of the [Capitalist Nobility]—the more abusive term for it would be [nouveau riche nobility], among others.

However, Maria Highline was openly unconcerned with that sort of thing.

".... If that's the case, I take back what I said about you being like a girl of marriageable age. You ought to conduct yourself with firmness."

"Lyle, you don't sound like a boy your age at all. And also, such a fine woman was sleeping right beside you when you awoke, you know? Would it kill you to at least drool over me a little?"

"A fine woman, you say...."

Lyle bitterly smiled at Maria in secret, as though he were unable to comprehend that. Precisely because she was a fine woman, it could not be said that she was singing her own praises. And she was an extremely fine one at that, too.

"Even so... Aren't you tired of being naked together? Have you forgotten that you had torn off my clothes and pushed me into the river? Without even wearing your underwear, you dragged me down into the depths, and finally finishing off with our first kiss?"

"That happened like ten years ago! And artificial respiration doesn't count, it doesn't count!"

"Yes, for ten years we've had an inseparable relationship. After such a long time, it can't be helped that you would be flustered about it."

"If that's the case, why are you turning your head away?"

"A hedge between keeps friendship green. Unlike a certain somebody, I'm a modest person."

"What, you're making me out to be like some promiscuous woman who doesn't have a single bit of modesty."

"If you disagree, why don't you prove it by putting some clothes on right away?"

Upon Lyle's rebuke, Maria started to put on her clothes while grumbling.

The sound of rustling clothes filled the room.

In order to block out his imagination that was running wild, Lyle got down on his hands and knees and resumed searching for his glasses.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for my glasses."

"Glasses? If that's what you're looking for, they're right here."

"Is that so? That's great— !"

When he looked back, Lyle's words were caught in his throat. Maria, who he had thought was putting on her clothes, had only put on a bustier. Because of her underwear, which pushed up her breasts moderately, her cleavage was emphasised even more. Moreover, Lyle's glasses were caught between, of all things, those soft mounds of hers.

"Look, it's really troublesome for me to have it here. Won't you quickly take it out for me?"

"..... Can't you pass it to me normally?"

"Hmm? I'm a noble's daughter, I can't lift anything heavier than a quill pen."

"Isn't that the total opposite of what you said earlier?"

"Look here, if you want me to put on my clothes faster, you have no choice but to quickly take your glasses out."

Maria bent forward, further emphasising her cleavage. With a mischievous smile and expression, it looked like she was taking her revenge for being treated so coldly.

*Bring it on. As if something of this level will faze me.*



Lyle fixated his glance at her, returning Maria's seemingly mischievous expression with a glowering look.

".....Maria has always been an outrageous tomboy of a noble's daughter, even from before."

"It is an honour to receive your praise."

Narrowing her jade eyes, Maria smiled, seemingly delighted from the bottom of her heart.

Expressionlessly maintaining his caution, Lyle reached out with his hand.



### Part 2

"..... Sheesh."

In order to cool down his burning hot body, Lyle took a deep breath and inhaled the air of early spring.

He had managed to retrieve his glasses. Putting them on and stretching his back, he looked like an average student. Lyle was affiliated with the Royal Vergenheim Academy, an institution for liberal arts that occupied a vast area in the eastern outskirts of Verg's royal capital, Ilsestein. Due to their comprehensive enriching curriculum, there was a saying that went, 'there is nothing you cannot learn at Vergenheim.'

As he walked through the academy's garden that was hazy with the morning mist and vapour, he spied a person's shadow moving across the open space of the lawn. It looked like a bonfire was burning brightly in the day.

"—Good morning, Hazel."

"Ah? Go-Good morning, Lyle."

The one who returned the greeting was a blond-haired, blue-eyed youth wearing old work clothes, who looked as though he was from a painting.

Hazel Clairry. Lyle's classmate, whom he shared a room with in the dormitory. "Are you heading back to the dorm? I was just thinking of having some food, so let's go together."

"Alright. But, what were you doing?"

"Well, I'm in charge of the [Springfire Festival]."

While walking, Hazel stretched his shoulders.

The Springfire Festival was a festival held at the beginning of spring. In order to drive away the winter's cold, a bonfire was kept burning for three days and nights straight.

"Isn't that supposed to be the student council's job?"

"It's a special part-time job. During the Springfire Festival holiday period, everyone is busy playing and enjoying themselves, so they're short-handed. Not just the night sentry, but even the preparations for the ball the student council is organising, it seems."

"Don't you have other things to do, Hazel?"

"Am I not a destitute noble who has to rely on a scholarship to attend school? I have to earn some cash when I have the chance to."

It was not just the Capitalist Nobility like Maria's Highline family that had increased in number; the number of nobles who had made losses had also increased, that was how the situation went. The time when nobles could simply make a living off being a noble had long since ended.

Then again, unlike Maria, Hazel had pretty much nothing to do with [nobility], even though he looked like one with his blond-haired, blue-eyed and rosy-cheeked appearance. Thanks to various complicated circumstances, they could get along with each other.

Returning to their dormitory whose only forte was its old-fashionedness, the duo headed for the dining hall. Usually, it would be flooded with hungry boarding students, but as one would expect, it was deserted during the holiday.

"Tch. It looks like everyone has already left a long time ago."

Although the dorm matron who made the meals was also not around, recently they had brought in a refrigerator—it operated through ammonia coolant, circulated by a small steam engine—and it was packed with ingredients that had been effectively stored.

The duo improvised a simple breakfast, and started eating restlessly.

"By the way, what are you planning to do during the holiday, Lyle?"

Hazel asked, while biting on salted cabbage.

"I too am planning on spending it being a computer<sup>1</sup> subcontractor<sup>2</sup> to earn some spending money."

Dipping rye bread into the slightly watery soup, Lyle answered.

"Ah—You're popular amongst the professors. They say you can do the calculations twice as fast as private contractors."

In most laboratories nowadays, calculation processing for large amounts of experimental results was done through contracting with a private computer company, known as a [Computing Factory]. Naturally, since they employed human wave tactics by having novices glare at the calculation tables, small errors were often reported.

To avoid having to rely on them, they had also researched on what was called the [Difference Engine], based on steam engine technology, an automatic calculator for mechanism equations—but as of now, they had not announced any practical implementations of the research results.

"Thanks to that, I thought I was going to be bored even when on break... but then Maria forcibly invited me to go sightsee the festival."

"That copper-haired noblewoman, eh."

The moment he heard Maria's name, a wide grin showed on Hazel's face.

".....What?"

"I'll be straightforward then; how far have you gone with her?"

"What do you mean by 'how far have you gone', didn't I say that Maria's only my childhood friend....."

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<sup>1</sup> A computer refer to 'one who computes', before computers were invented. A human calculator, if you will

<sup>2</sup> A contractor is... let's say you run a business. You require the services of, say an electrician, but you don't have one employed. Hence, you engage the services of a electrician. He will then become a 'contractor'. A sub-contractor is someone the contracted electrician (for example) contracts with, for support. All these are legal definitions, just for the record.

"You haven't laid your hands on something that fine? Has your little stump rotted away?"

"..... I've said this many times before. Don't you think you ought to stop saying that sort of thing?"

"I got it. Nobles have a reputation for liking dirty jokes, y'know. My ancestor five generations ago once had a wise saying that went 'Men of nobility will die if they are forbidden from touching elsewhere on a woman's body except for above her belly'."

"..... Although I fail to understand it, what I do understand is that it's a meaningless phrase which sounds like a wise saying."

"Moreover, what you're letting slip away is making a mistress of Maria Highline, the only daughter of the Highline Group, which is the central figure in the industries of iron, steel and railworks. Why are you even hesitating?"

"Evidently, that would be the reason. An upstart youngster like me, would never be allowed to do so."

"Aren't you modest, Mr «Disciple of the Last Hexe»?"

".....It's embarrassing, stop calling me that."

Lyle frowned.

The name of «The Last Hexe», Erllua Azoth, was well-known even in the countries far west.

And Lyle, who had been raised by Erllua, was given the nickname of the «Disciple of the Last Hexe» behind his back at Vergenheim Academy.

"To begin with, isn't the fortune left behind by your master rather substantial? Aren't you well-to-do financially?"

"The patents for things that my master had invented have all been transferred to the Highline Group."

"What!?"

"After all, the leader of the previous generation—Maria's grandfather, is my guardian, and furthermore, in the first place, he was the biggest financier my master had. The only thing left for me was that lonesome mansion in the countryside from years ago, and that too was sold half a year ago."

"But, y'know, is the thing about the unpublished <Erbe Der Last Hexe><sup>3</sup> true?"

"That again...."

Erllua, who was known in the world as a 'rare prodigal scientist', was also truly a 'genuine witch'. For the sake of concealing that fact, she had virtually conducted all her research by herself. That secretiveness, ironically, had led to her being given a second title, that of being a «Witch».

After her disappearance, it was rumoured that 'there was a possibility of there being unpublished knowledge and technology that had been concealed by the Last Hexe'.

That was called the <Erbe Der Last Hexe>, the urban legend that was being circulated around.

(Indeed, it would not be strange for that master of mine to have hidden various things, but...)

".... All I'm doing is simply relying on my master's research and fortune. I'm truly a failure as an apprentice."

There was no credibility behind the rumours of the <Erbe>, was what Lyle felt.

To Lyle, the most important things left to him were the wisdom and knowledge that Erllua had taught and drilled into him. He took pride in that, and it was all the inheritance he would need.

".... Rather than admire, I don't really think that part of you is very sensible."

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<sup>3</sup> Erbe Der Last Hexe is part-German, part-English. 'Erbe' is an inheritance/legacy, so it could be interpreted the Inheritance/Legacy of the Last Hexe (witch), as it might end up as a wordplay in the end and have double meaning (Last means something else in German).



"Leave me alone—and Maria too. Eventually, she'll be married to a wealthy noble financier. It would not do to mar her in any way."

"Is that noblewoman really so precious to you? Being 'ladylike' is already an old-fashioned conservative way of thinking. Rather, she's the type you should go stab with your sword head-on, y'know."

"....."

Lyle sipped his soup in silence, as he had already known that a long time ago.

"Come to think of it... do you know who Vilhelm Zest is?"

"That senior from the fifth year? Last year, at the age of eighteen, he succeeded the military Zest family as a Margrave<sup>4</sup>, an extraordinary man—rumours of whom have spread so fast that even I've heard of them. That Zest?"

"A really different kind of noble compared to me. Even in the academy, he's always surrounded by and bringing along younger nobles from prominent families. A Margrave like that, for the sake of inviting Miss Maria to the ball at the end of the holiday, had even made advances on her... how do you think that turned out?"

Looking at the smiling, seemingly happy Hazel, Lyle had a rather unpleasant premonition.

"She slapped that dandy right across the cheek, and told him, 'Did that quite wake you up?'. It was an act of brilliance. There were more students who were in admiration than in surprise."

"That happened, huh....."

Lyle resisted the dizziness that afflicted his head.

Though I already knew how her uncontrollable, reckless, and without-a-care-for-what-others-may-think personality was like.....

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<sup>4</sup> Margrave is a medieval title for a nobleman who had military responsibilities for a border province of a kingdom. In this case, the kingdom is Ilsestein. The setting is influenced by Germany, I guess, there are quite a few German words here and there.

"... Even absurdity should have a limit."

"You're the only person who can get along well with that noblewoman. So, hurry up and make something happen already. In the first place, how are you able to hold yourself back with such a perfect pair of breasts before you? Be honest. Are there any guys who dislike breasts? None. Ain't that right, my brother?"

While cackling, Hazel moved both his hands in an extremely obscene manner.

"..... Hazel. If you're going to be that persistent about it, I have something that I want to say."

"Eh? What's that?"

"I won't lend you my notes at all, nor will I show you the way to the exam."

"Ngh! Th-That would be troubling! If I don't have your notes, I'll end up dropping out of class! And to make matters worse, if I can't sell the transcriptions of your notes, I'll starve to death in an instant!"

"Why is this guy putting food before his exams... wait, what was it that you said?"

"Heheh, pardon me, Lord Lyle. Bestow upon this pitiable lamb your scriptures and promises."

"Very well."

Looking down at Hazel who was prostrating himself on the ground, Lyle felt a little better.

### Part 3

After setting up a fire in the stove and taking a hot shower, Lyle changed into his outdoor clothes. But to be exact, it was only the usual clothes, a shirt, vest, slacks and an overcoat on top.

Though the standard black overcoat specified by the academy was unfashionable and thus unpopular, Lyle saw it as a mage's robes and hence it was his favourite, comparatively.

"—Hm. I forgot something."

Lyle was just about to depart from the cramped dorm room (Hazel's only saving grace was that he was a neat freak) when he checked and did not feel the usual sensation in his pocket. Hurriedly, he picked up the pocket watch left on top of the desk. On the exterior cover that was adorned with delicate silverwork, a polished amber was giving off a dull shine.

It was the watch that Erllua, Lyle's teacher, had given him just before her disappearance. Inserting amber which was indispensable for magi, into the cover of the watch that was made with cutting-edge mechanisms, was truly like something «The Last Hexe» would do.

"One could even say that this is the <Erbe Der Last Hexe>.... Oops, gotta go, gotta go."

When he opened the lid to check the time, he realised that a significant amount of time had passed.

Stuffing the pocket watch deep into his pocket, Lyle flew out of the dormitory.

The dormitory was located at the northern end of the vast academy. Lyle rushed towards the western side of said vast academy's interior.

A single horse carriage was stopped before the sturdy and old-fashioned main gate made from iron. The young girl folded her arms in an imposing stance and pouted as Lyle arrived panting and out of breath.

"—You're late!"

Though she was making a racket over Lyle first thing in the morning, still, she did dress up rather seriously today. An elegant pale pink dress. Tapping on the ground were precisely measured, custom-made boots. On her head was a wide-brimmed sun hat. No matter how one looked at her, she was exactly the image of a high-class noblewoman.

*I would have no complaints if she were dressed like that all the time,* sighed Lyle.

"Weren't you the one who suddenly called me out? Doing that and saying that I'm late is rather unreasonable."

"Why do you say that, seeing as you've known me for so long? Haven't I always been that way since the past?"

"..... Now that you mention it, I guess I should have known."

Shaking his head exasperatedly, his gaze met with the girl sitting at the coachman's position on the carriage who was stretching her neck out. She had large green eyes and light brown skin that gave one the impression of a Southerner. Over her light blond hair, she wore a pure white headdress, which was the symbol of maids.

"Good morning, Milla."

"Good morning to you, Master Lyle."

The maid serving under Maria, MillaGauche, returned with a smile reminiscent of a sunflower.

Lyle knew her from when he was a child. One could say that she was Lyle's comrade in arms in being abused by Maria.

"Looook here, what are you waiting for, get on quickly."

Maria pushed Lyle towards the carriage. Once they had boarded the passenger's compartment, Milla started to move the horse carriage with a crack of her whip.

The liveliness of the atmosphere grew as one travelled from the outskirts towards the central area. Upon arriving at the street where government

boards were located, they were caught up in an absurd disturbance. Food stalls that were giving off sweet aromas were everywhere, and so were the resounding sounds from ringing glasses of malt beer.

Much less a horse carriage, even the trams were not able to move, it seemed.

"We can't proceed any further, eh."

"It looks like there's still a fair distance to go... ah, I remembered. I've got something here that'll be good to kill some time with."

Saying that, Maria took out a single envelope from the bag beside her.

"It's a report from the research institute that I'm financing... they seem to be having a hard time with it. Could I get your opinion on this?"

"... Did you bring me all the way here into this crowded town centre for that?"

"I wonder? Leaving that aside, won't you do this for me, p-r-e-t-t-y-p-l-e-a-s-e?"

There was never an instance when he had refused Maria's 'please'. Lyle promptly gave in, took the envelope, and retrieved the contents inside.

"..... This is..... a communication device that uses radio waves? With that, it is also possible to transmit sound....."

"If implemented practically, it would probably be referred to as a [telephone]. We're in no hurry, so take your time."

While buying mead that was mixed with soda from the carriage window, Maria had said that carefreely, but Lyle was already concentrating on the documents.

"A film to receive sound... Using pig's intestines, that's pretty classic... What if there's electrical resistance in that thin film... How about a carbon or metal film? But that would mean direct contact... come to think of it, a little while ago I did some calculations on the piezoelectric effect using crystals for the professor who taught electricity. If I apply those principles, a no-contact



approach could be possible, but... it's overly delicate, so putting it to practical use would be....."

Lyle was unconsciously moving his finger along the documents, holding out a fountain pen and taking careful aim. Then, he promptly thrust it hard at the documents.

Unifying the accumulated knowledge and repeating the counter-arguments, his thoughts formed an idea according to the notations and equations running through his head. Lyle moved his writing brush, with the likeness of a baby who had just learned to write.

"..... It can be done."

Struck with an idea, he finished writing out the layout of his design as much as he could.

Filled with a sense of accomplishment, he raised his head, and saw that Maria was playing around with her hair in boredom. The scenery outside the horse carriage had changed from the city central to that of the outskirts.

Upon taking out his pocket watch to check the time,

"—It's already been an hour?"

"Honestly, your concentration is superb."

Although Maria was smiling bitterly as though she was amazed, but that quickly changed to shock when she read his memo on the documents.

"..... This ought to have been only one hour. I doubt there was any need to purposely take you through the town centre. In such a short time you've raised three different methods one after the other and even pointed out our problems... We'll be able to start producing a prototype right away."

"I didn't do that much. The part on the microphone that changes sound to electrical signals was already made clear. What I did was something like building a little house over a solid foundation."

"That must have been a really splendid little house then. If you like, I could make you the chief-in-charge of that little house right away?"

"That's absurd!"

Lyle shook his head hurriedly.

"The evaluation is based off accumulated results. Doing that for scrawls like this is beyond what I deserve."

"That's simply modesty, or rather, how should I put it..... I'd like you to rely on me a little more."

Maria shrugged her shoulders, with an expression that seemed to say, 'I understand, but...'

Shortly after, the horse carriage arrived at their destination.

At the western outskirts of the royal capital, there had once been a shipbuilding factory directly under military control. Although it had been a considerably large-scale facility, a sudden fire had destroyed everything three years ago. The reconstruction of the factory was integrated as the expansion of the second shipbuilding factory that was under construction at that time. There were no practical plans that stood out for the remaining burnt area to be used for, and thus it ended up as a so-called multi-purpose plaza that had no distinct function.

That multi-purpose plaza at the western outskirts of the royal capital was, as of now, filled with many multi-coloured tents with people going in and out. The popularity of the place had surged to an extent that would not lose to even the central district of the royal capital.

It was a performing arts festival that assembled street performers, circuses, amongst others, all at once. As there were many troublesome procedures the performers had to go through before they could conduct operations in the royal capital, it was comparatively easier to get approval for shows at this location.

Stopping the horse carriage at the chosen spot, Lyle and the others started their sightseeing.

"Wow! Look there, Lyle! It's the first time I've seen something like a saber tiger!"

Without delay, Maria hugged the two metre long beast of the big cat family that was lying sprawled at the roadside. The opposite of the timid Lyle, she was in high spirits.

"Isn't it cute? Hey, let's raise one at home."

'It's regrettable, but I do not think the master<sup>1</sup> will approve because he hates cats', said Milla who was gently smiling.

"Tch. Even though it's so cute."

Being stroked by Maria, the saber tiger opened its half-closed eyes. Because it was pleasant, it did not look as though it disliked it, and it opened its mouth, as though yawning after being tickled at the nape of its neck. Upon seeing those large knife-like fangs, Lyle abruptly fainted.

"Are you alright?"

Milla gently stroked Lyle who was green in the face on his back. That diligence was appropriate for the image of a maid, but on the other hand, Lyle was rather pitiable, as a man.

"Ugh... sorry about that, Milla."

"You're welcome."

"Next, let's keep moving on!"

Before long, having had her fill of the exotic wild beast, Maria's attention turned towards a target practice shooting stall.

"Hmm? Doesn't that look pretty fun?"

Normally, at these shooting stalls, they used balls, toys and arrows, for example, but it seemed like what that stall used were toys with a spring mechanism that imitated rifles. They had reproduced the bolt action mechanism that had just been made practical recently. It was a rather elaborate toy.

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<sup>1</sup> This master here refers to the head of the household.

"Welcome. It'll be seven coppers for three tries."

"Isn't that a little pricey?"

"Please take a look at our prizes. There are perfumes famous in the neighbouring country of Galea, quality hair ornaments produced in the industrial city of Imata. They may be expensive, but there is a good reason for that."

"I see. Well then—Lyle", as she was saying that, Maria passed over the toy rifle over to Lyle.

"I want that earring."

"You can get it yourself, can't you? Isn't marksmanship your forte?"

"Lyle, I'm doing it for your benefit, y'know? It's a girl's responsibility to leave the spotlight to the guy."

"So it's that kind of reason....."

He could not understand it, but nevertheless, it was not like he did not have an interest in such an unusual game.

Paying the copper coins and loading a cork bullet, Lyle prepared the toy rifle. Aiming at the centre of the wooden tokens that represented the prizes, he pulled the trigger. With a 'bon', the cork bullet was fired, but it went wide off its mark.

"Aah! Do it steadily, Lyle!"

Maria hit the back of his body, giving him a pep talk. *Does she really like that ornament so much?* Aiming carefully, he fired the second round. Because he got a little more used to it after the earlier try, the shot would not be as off as the first time. Though he thought that it would hit, the bullet went in a totally wrong direction.

"This is....."

Because the parabola was totally different from earlier, Lyle noticed the trick of the cork bullets. In order to make the shooter unable to grasp how to aim, the centre of gravity had been purposely altered.

"Go on, don't you have just one more shot left?"

At the words of the shopkeeper who was wearing a peaceful expression, Lyle loaded his last round while feeling astonished.

(..... No other choice.)

*Although I'm rather reluctant to do so, let me try a little something here as well.*

While preparing the toy gun, Lyle extended his hand to the watch in his pocket, touching the amber that was inserted onto the cover with his fingertip.

"——— That which exists at the end of light, the end of darkness. That which denotes the origin of wind, the origin of fire. Of forgotten dusk, of heretic gold. That which is the cradle of time. ———"

Lyle whispered in a soft voice that blended into the clamour of the surroundings.

Exciting the magical power that was imprisoned within the amber, was the incantation known as <Oracio>.

Before long, at the fingertip touching the amber on the cover of the pocket watch in the pocket, a tiny warmth that could not be said to be heat was born. It was the sensation of excited magical power.

The hidden amber resonating with his mind, Lyle started constructing the 'magic'.

(The acceleration due to gravity is fixed at  $9.806\text{m/s}^2$ —the mass of the bullet, the speed of the wind—grasped. Hypothesising 'magic'—)

Magecraft was a study of how one could, using magical power, interfere with reality with 'magic' that distorted the laws of said reality. For that reason, it

was necessary for one to have a deep understanding of the underlying principles of the cosmos. Without that, one would not understand what was being distorted.

That is to say, turning the user's knowledge into 'power'. Although magic could distort even the laws of reality for the desired results, it was not omnipotent. A practitioner would fail if they hypothesised excessively unreasonable 'magic', and receive the entire backlash of the distortion.

However, what was being manipulated this time was the trajectory of the cork bullet, which was a rather meagre thing.

In accordance to 'magic', Lyle formed a mental image of the trajectory. That image bearing a sense of reality, his belief reached its peak—

— \*Pon\*.

The fired cork bullet was corrected, following the trajectory of Lyle's mental image, and hit dead centre of its mark. With a \*batan\*, the mark easily fell over.

"B-bull's eye....", said the shopkeeper while ringing the bell, flabbergasted.

(..... That wasn't very mature of me.)

Lyle contemplated a little.

'Magic must be kept secret. By no means should you expose it to the public eye. They are but illusions made into fabrication.' —that was an unspoken rule of all magi, carried on since the Dark Ages, when the [Magus Hunters] of the Church had been powerful.

Though he did not fear being exposed, it might have been somewhat rash of him to use it at target practice stand in the festival.

However, when he saw how pleased Maria was as she took the earrings, Lyle felt much better about it.

"Does it look good on me?"



It was a high-grade item, but Maria already had as many of them as she wanted. Although he felt it was a little inferior compared to her current attire, he thought that the bead earrings which matched her emerald green eyes looked good within her copper hair.

"Yep. It looks really good on you."

"Is that so? Then let's go! —Wait, I forgot something."

With a clap, Maria took into her hands the toy rifle that was used for target practice.

"Where was this made?"

"Huh? Oh, it's just a little something that was made by a small factory indebted to my family."

"I see. —Milla, this toy is pretty well made. Dispatch an envoy right away to the factory that made this and obtain an exclusive contract."

"Understood."

The shopkeeper stared in wonder at the exchange between Maria and Milla.

Lyle too, was in admiration of the promptness of that decision.

Though the Highlines were just one household among others that were blessed with business ability by nature, Maria was one who stood out from the rest even amongst that. Both her grandfather and father had complained that, 'it's a waste to have that in a woman'.

*—Then again, whether it was in a man or a woman, that had nothing to do with Maria.*

Within Lyle's field of vision, Maria had turned her head back abruptly.

"Hm? What is it? Did you fall for me?"

"As if. I'm always seeing you around, so much that I get tired of it. I was looking at the earrings."

"Oh? Well, let's just leave it at that."

Smiling as though she had played a prank and twirling around, Maria returned the toy gun, seemingly in high spirits.

### Part 4

Wandering about in the day, Lyle and the others continued their sightseeing as they bought foodstuffs like smoked meat and spit-roasted potato.

And then, what had caught their eyes was a performance stage that involved knives and swords. That in itself was sure to attract an audience.

A man had his entire body up to his neck entirely covered in an oblong box, and his partner was stabbing sword after sword into it.

"Whoa, doesn't that pierce straight into the centre!"

"Aren't they doing that right in front of an audience? It should be safe."

The master and servant pair Maria and Milla, and the surrounding spectators raised their voices in surprise upon seeing the swords piercing into the box.

"Thrusting the sword in is part of their show, isn't it?"

"Is that so?"

"I think that that guy is a contortionist. They'd be able to perform that kind of stunt, right? When the audience sees the swords being stabbed inside, surely that would play a trick on their minds, wouldn't it?"

Lyle explained in a serious tone.

The spectators who heard that slowly started to spread the information, and the audience gradually grew bored with the performance.

"P-Please wait a second, everyone! Since you've said that much, then we cannot remain silent any longer. Let us present our grand finale—"

Upon saying that, the magician pushed in a wagon that a big box was placed on.

"Now, we'll split the body of the man inside the box into two—"

"Ah, for that, a man will already be present in the box from the start with his legs sticking out. They use a slanted mirror inside so the audience sees that it's empty."

The men on the stage hardened their business smiles.

The completely spoiled audience left the stage, one by one.

"L-Look at what you have done, you brat!"

The men got off the stage in a rage—while brandishing swords in their hands.

"Not good! Let's run away!"

Maria and Milla immediately broke into a run, and Lyle followed suit in a hurry.

Shoving their way through the tides of people through the curving path, the sound of angry voices slowly receded. His hands on his knees, Lyle tried to catch his breath.

"Oh dear..... Come to think of it, it's been a while since I've been chased around with Maria— ?"

Looking around, he saw neither shape nor shadow of either his copper-haired childhood friend and her maid. It looked like he had been separated from them while running away.

"I'm beat....."

Just as he was thinking of heading back to the horse carriage, he heard the same angry voices of the men from earlier. Lyle then dived at the closest tent nearby in a panic. Hiding himself behind the curtains, the passing angry men disappeared into the distance.

"—Are you a customer?"

Turning around, he saw that a man who looked like the cashier, was looking at Lyle suspiciously after he had suddenly entered the tent.

"..... How much will this be?"

He would feel embarrassed if he had just left like that. Paying the admission fee, Lyle went further into the tent.

Inside the tent, twenty or so spectators were sitting on benches. For some reason, they were practically all males. With the addition of Lyle, it seemed like the numbers were filled up. Before long, the tent was closed up.

A candlestick illuminated the stage, and with that, a man who seemed like the host appeared on the stage and bowed his head.

"A good day to you, ladies and gentlemen. Who we have on stage now is our beautiful, one-of-a-kind songstress, who will be gracing us with her heavenly voice! The moment of a transient illusion, please enjoy it!"

*Aah, no wonder.* Lyle now understood the reason why there was an unusual number of male customers. It looked like it was because they were drawn by the 'beautiful songstress'.

As he was lightly regretting his choice due to the fact that it had not been his original intention to participate, the illumination in the tent was extinguished.

When the light was relit, the illumination revealed a massive birdcage in the middle of the stage. What was imprisoned inside the birdcage was no bird, but a lonesome small girl.

'Hoo...', went the audience, leaking out a sigh.

It had not been a lie. The girl inside the birdcage was truly, extremely lovely and beautiful.

Her pale silver hair was softly undulating as it reached down to her waist, captivating the eyes of the audience.

Because of the repeatedly overlapping thin black cloth, the wings of a bird could be seen at the hem of the dress in which her slender body was clad.

From the openings of the dress were limbs so fine that they seemed like they would break, so white they seemed like snow dissolving from the heat of a candle's flame. It might have been because of that, that the choker and lock around her slim neck further emphasised the impression of her being imprisoned. As though it was a play depicting an imprisoned nightingale.

The girl lifted her head.

She was probably around two or three years younger than Lyle. Her features were smooth like white porcelain. A small nose and mouth, and large charming eyes that were obscured by her long eyelashes.

However, nothing could be felt from that expression of hers, which gave off an impression of being man-made, inhuman.

—Almost as though she's a doll of excellent craftsmanship....

While he was thinking that, the girl on the stage looked towards Lyle. Their eyes met.

Lyle's breath was taken away at the sight of the girl's golden eyes that were looking his way—but she immediately averted her eyes, and faced directly forward, expressionless.

The men in the audience while grinning broadly, were throwing dirty looks at the girl. Her black dress that opened up wide at the shoulders and back prominently displayed her white, ephemeral figure. Coupled with her doll-like emotionless face, in some respects that had a charm that invited perversion.

And then,

"..... Aah—————"

The moment the girl began her song, the atmosphere in the tent completely changed.

The looks of curiosity from the men, had all become expressions of astonishment and wonder.

Lyle was no exception, his eyes had widened instinctively.

–*What a.....*

With a feeling akin to shuddering, the hairs at the back of his neck standing on ends, Lyle thought.

*What a beautiful voice.*

Almost as though someone was plucking the strings of the midwinter night sky—a soprano that soared higher and higher. Like a crystal reflecting the pale moonlight—was her extremely clear voice.

The girl's voice resounded, even resonating with the air within Lyle's lungs.

He noticed that he had been deeply moved emotionally, after the girl's song had drawn to a close. Lyle was the first to clap his hands in applause, and the rest of the audience who seemed as though they had their souls extracted out of them followed suit simultaneously, though albeit delayed.

Without a change in her expression, the girl bowed.

Amidst the applause, the host earlier then made an appearance on the stage.

"Had it not been a treat for the ears? However, our show has not quite ended! Everyone—do you all know what a witch is?"

To the words of the man who was saying that it was a 'secret not meant to leave this tent', Lyle unintentionally hiccoughed. As the attention of the people focused upon him, Lyle smiled and waved his hand apologetically. "..... Ahem. Everyone here has ought to have heard of fairy-tales. This girl does not just have a beautiful face and a heavenly voice, but is also a user of ancient magic! Have a good look at that power!"

As the man finished his speech, the girl went out of the birdcage onto the stage. Quietly opening her eyes, she slowly raised both her arms toward the sky.

"..... Oooh!"





The audience raised their voices in surprise. The two candlesticks at both ends of the stage were gently floating into the air. With the candle flames flickering, they flew around in circles above the audience's heads.

*This is.....*

In the midst of the audience who were making a stir, Lyle was overcome with a wholly different kind of surprise.

*It is no optical illusion, nor a trick using thread. Whilst that may be true.... I cannot see any hint of the usage of amber....*

Lyle was then struck with a sudden realisation, and thrust his hand into his pocket. The amber inserted onto the cover of the pocket watch, was giving off a fleeting luminescence without <Oracio>.

*It's resonating with the magical power? ..... That's no parlour trick. This is genuine magic!*

Believing that and looking towards the stage, Lyle saw that an unusual phenomenon was happening to the girl. She was perspiring heavily at her brow, and she seemed to be slightly wincing, even as she maintained her previous emotionless expression.

"..... Uu."

The girl moaned, and her body began to shake violently.

The candlesticks that were flying about in the air suddenly stopped momentarily,

"Ouch! It's hot!"

Cried the spectators who suffered burns from the flames of the falling candlesticks.

The inside of the tent turned into an uproar, and the performance was ceased with immediate effect.

Part 5

"Why are you giving this to me? Huh?"

Outside the tent, a youth who had been burned raised his voice. Because of his well-dressed appearance, one could instantly tell that he was nobility, and a wealthy one at that.

The male host from earlier was repeatedly bowing his head.

"That was an unforeseen occurrence..... We'll return your admission charge— "

"As if that can compensate for this! What are you going to do about my hair?"

The youth, holding up his burnt hair—though in all honesty, he did not have that much in the first place—threatened.

"We, the family of Count Schwatten, have served the country of Ilsestein ever since its founding! To have turned a flame towards someone of that lineage, you've gone too far!"

Lyle who had slipped into the crowd of curious onlookers, frowned at the overbearing young man.

Moreover, it looked like he was not alone. His companions numbered four, all of whom were well-dressed youths like him, and they surrounded the host.

"H-How should I apologise in order to....."

"How about this."

The group of young nobles grinned broadly, having thought of something.

"The girl who had made that blunder—we'll have her apologise to us personally."

"Huh? That's—"

"In other words, we'll take care of her. Surely you guys won't want to keep someone who made such a serious blunder? If you agree, we will not press the issue further and let bygones be bygones."

In short, they were telling him to 'sell the girl to us'. Their tone was heavy with coercion. Lyle then slipped out from the crowd.

Slipping into the tent which had become empty due to the racket outside and concealing his worry, he walked into the backstage. In a small room separated by curtains, the girl from earlier was seated on a chair quietly.

The silver haired girl then opened her closed eyelids, and faced Lyle with a flowing movement.

"Is there something you require of me?"

*As I thought, her voice is beautiful—breathtakingly beautiful and calm.*

"..... The men whom you dropped the candlesticks on earlier, it seems like they are nobles."

"Yes."

"They were surrounding your boss. Saying something about handing you over."

"Yes."

Lyle frowned at the completely unchanging voice and expression of the girl.

"And you're fine with that?"

"It was my mistake. I cannot be a burden to those who had taken me in."

A sense of obligation—he could not imagine that being the case, as her voice made it seem like those were the affairs of strangers.

Just as Lyle was about to argue further, there were signs that indicated the approach of others from the back.

*Not good*—as he thought that, Lyle was pushed behind the curtains into hiding by the girl.

Repositioning herself back on the chair, the young noble from earlier then entered without calling out.

"Hmph, you were here?"

The young noble boldly approached the girl, and lifted her chin up casually.

"The folk song you sang was truly beautiful. What's more, it was with an indescribable elegance. By any chance, are you from a noble family that had suffered ruin?"

"....."

"Don't want to speak up? Well, whatever. Be grateful, for after this you'll have no need to worry about either food or clothing."

"....."

The youth angrily manhandled her face. The girl was probably thinking whether she should be frightened or flattered.

However, the girl only looked back at him intently in silence.

The young noble, grinding his teeth, suddenly struck the girl across her cheek.

The girl's slender body fell from the chair, her pale silver hair fluttering.

"Those ..... insolent eyes of yours!"

Readily throwing aside the image of a well-dressed noble, the youth leaned over the girl. Grabbing hold of her neck with his hands, he was smiling widely, feeling a sense of superiority at the sight of the girl's agonised look.

"Hmph, that's the look I wanted to see. If you'll cry out with that kind of face— !"

"Argh!"

Smashing the chair downwards onto the youth's back, Lyle winced, his hands numbed by the sheer impact. The young noble who had not noticed the approaching Lyle, fell on top of the girl.

"Let's go! Quickly get up!"

Taking the hand of the girl with a vague, unsure expression, Lyle rushed out of the tent.

"H-Hold it right there! H-He got away— ! Give chase! Get him— !"

Looking as though he was forcing the girl along, Lyle cut across the noisy plaza.

Upon slipping into and hiding in the spaces between the tents, the group of young nobles then came running, out of breath.

"Where are they!"

"Not here. They're pretty fast."

"Damn.....! They're making a fool out of me!"

While cursing loudly, the group of young nobles then dashed off elsewhere.

Lyle released the breath that he had been holding in.

"..... Why did you do something like that?"

The girl who had hidden along with Lyle, called out to him, still wearing that emotionless expression, tilting her head to the side.

"Why, you ask..... if something like that happens right before me, then I cannot stand by and do naught."

Hearing that answer, the girl closed her mouth and looked as though she was finding it hard to comprehend.

Sticking his head out and taking a look, he ascertained that their pursuers were gone, and then Lyle started running again.

The girl, who had completely no sense of 'self,' was pulled along, doubt showing on her porcelain-like face, and she asked Lyle for the second time.

"Is it because you are a magus?"

"You noticed?"

"I felt the vestiges of faint magical power from you. When I was casting magic, I clearly sensed the magical power of amber..... because I had been distracted by that, I lost control over the magic."

"That's not the only reason, is it? If you were in such a weakened state, it is only inevitable that you went past your limits."

The slenderness of the girl's arm that he gripped. It could not be explained just as a matter of physique. Though her expression had not changed, she was already tottering, unsteady on her feet.

"You— "

"There they are!"

In the crowds far away, the young noble whom Lyle had smashed a chair on had raised his voice angrily.

"..... For the whole of today, all I've gotten is to get chased around!"

Hearing the bellows of rage chasing him from behind and finding no escape routes, Lyle surveyed the surroundings.

"There!"

Just ahead on the road, was a large-scale performance of magic tricks being held on a stage. And onto that stage, Lyle jumped, carrying the girl.

"W-What are you doing, Mr Customer?"

"Let me borrow the casket."

Together with the girl, Lyle slipped into the casket placed in the middle of the stage. As the magician was confused, the party who were chasing Lyle had also jumped onto the stage.



"We've got him!"

"Did you think you could hide yourself with just this?"

The youths, with clenched fists, vigorously threw off the lid of the casket.

"T-There's no one there!"

The youths were all looking at the interior of the casket, but they could see neither shape nor shadow of Lyle or the girl.

"Oooh!"

In the midst of the applause by the audience, who had thought the chain of disturbances were a part of the performance, the group of young nobles were at a loss.

"What on earth...."

"Oi! Look at that!"

In the direction that one of the youths was pointing, were the figures of the escaping Lyle and the girl.

"D-Damn it!"

"Hey! Give chase!"

Although they shoved their way through the applauding audience, they were being delayed, and the size of the two figures running away slowly became smaller and smaller.

### Part 6

"..... Did we lose them?"

For now, it looked like they had shaken off the group of noble's sons from earlier. Lyle let out a sigh of relief.

"If— "

Lyle looked to the side.

The girl with the pale silver hair, expressionless and emotionless, was looking intently at Lyle.

"If we have shaken them off, then it would be best for you to go back during this interval of time."

"..... What about you?"

"I will be returning. I cannot be a burden to them."

"You can't possibly be thinking of going back there, can you?"

Lyle said while looking into the girl's eyes. The peculiar colour of those eyes could have been described as either golden or amber.

"You're able to cast magic without the use of amber, and those [Eyes of Amber]—You're a Phantasm, right?"

The girl's expression wavered, even if only a little.

Phantasm.

Different from human magi who had to draw out magical power from amber, they were races whom were born carrying magical power within them—Phantasm was the general term for races like fiels, lycans and devils. Once, they had lived among humans in coexistence.

However, as magic was assumed to be a thing of fairy-tales, they too, were considered to be a product of fantasies.

During the Dark Ages, when the church's oppression had been at its peak, the magi, for the sake of guarding themselves had sealed away their knowledge; and the Phantasm, hating the conflict that had been brought about, secluded themselves away in the deep mountains and ravines where humans did not tread.

"Although I don't know the reason why you were there in such a place, right now you're in such a weakened state because you're lacking in magical power, right? It would be best if you went back to the hidden haven where you belong to, right away."

"..... That would seem best."

For the first time, a faint trace of emotion flickered across the girl's pale face. Faint and vague, Lyle could not clearly distinguish what it was, but it seemed like it was self-derision.

Just as Lyle was about to enquire further into it, they ran out of time.

From the crowds in the distance, once again he could hear the sounds of angry voices. They were amazingly persistent.

"Nobles nowadays sure have a lot of free time on their hands. Let's get away, I'll leave the questions for later—What's wrong!?"

The girl's face was growing increasingly paler and paler, her breathing was haggard and it looked painful.

Lyle hurriedly caught her swaying, slender body.

"..... Please do not be concerned about me, kindly get away— "

"Absolutely not."

To the words of the girl who was not concerned in the least bit about herself, Lyle replied, slightly irritated.

"There's no way I can overlook someone who's in trouble."

Saying that, he was just about to move, but from the path ahead, the sounds of the pursuers drew closer. Unable to make a move, Lyle was surrounded by the group of young nobles.

The surrounding people gathered around a distance away, curious, as though they were sightseeing an attraction.

"What a rude fellow."

The youth with the burnt forelocks, was the one to start the ball rolling.

"Recently, it has been bugging me how many people there are who have been enthusiastic about the equality of social classes. I'll firmly give your body a lesson on how wrong that misapprehension is."

The youths slowly approached.

Although Lyle had some confidence in running away, but it would be extremely unlikely he would succeed while carrying the girl who could not move. He moved in front of her, as the least he could do was to shield her from violence, and one of the youths seemed to notice something.

"Wait a second..... isn't he Lyle Waldstein?"

"What? The «Disciple of the Last Hexe»?"

It looked like they were also students of Vergenheim.

The youth with the burnt forelocks, glared at Lyle with a fiendish grin.

"I see..... that Lyle Waldstein?"

"..... I don't know which Lyle Waldstein you're referring to, but indeed, that is my name."

"It's great if you're him. Because you've been quite the eyesore."

It seemed like the group of them shared the same opinion. With violence in their eyes, they glowered at Lyle.

"He's only just a commoner scholarship student.... and too impertinent for one."

"In the current times, won't people think badly of you if you don't get off your high horse?"

"You little..... ! A commoner dares to tell that to us!"

Looking at the suddenly angered sons of nobles, Lyle nodded his head within his heart, as they were reacting just as he had wanted them to. Their attention was solely directed at him. This way, they would forget about the girl and would probably end up hitting him.

Though he had considered things calmly, Lyle's prediction was quickly proven false.

The silver-haired girl silently stepped out in front of Lyle, and bowed her head deeply to the noble's sons.

"..... From the beginning, it is I who is the cause of this. This person had gotten involved halfway. By all means, please take your anger out on me instead."

"Wh— ?"

Lyle was more indignant, rather than surprised or shocked. Even though she was so weak she looked like she would collapse any moment, this girl could still say something like that. At this rate, she would be taken away by them, and things would turn out badly.

Her outstretched hand motioned for him to fall back, but before that Lyle was seized by the girl's eyes.

In the midst of her pale silver hair, the girl's eyes released a light. Like the colour of dusk—it was magical excitement light..... !  
Just as he recognised that, Lyle's body stiffened.

('Shadowstitch'..... No, the magic of 'Bewitchment'!)

As he expected, she was a Phantasm. Those amber eyes that gave off the light of magical excitation were proof of that.

The girl who had stopped Lyle's body, had those thin eyebrows of hers strained as though she was enduring the pain. However, she quickly returned to her expressionless self, and bowed her head once more to the noble's sons.

"..... If it is within my ability, I will do whatever I can to apologise. Please."

"....."

The youth with the burnt forelocks, silently stepped forward. Stopping in front of the girl who still had her head bowed, he mercilessly swung his arm. The weakened girl fell to the ground helplessly.

"I'll have you apologise to me in full later on. For now.... he goes first."

Saying that, the youth looked towards Lyle.

The paralysis that overcame him when the girl had been struck lifted, as Lyle was grabbed and locked from behind by the young nobles that had surrounded him.

"..... Lowly and impertinent commoner, know your place!"

Smiling sadistically at Lyle who could not move, the youth noble raised his arm overhead.

Firmly resolving not to scream out, Lyle gnashed his molars together.

– However, no fist landed on Lyle's face.

Out of nowhere, a cork bullet had hit the forehead of the youth noble.

"Ow..... W-What was that?"

"Yep yep, that's as far as you go."

The voice was not loud, yet it still resounded throughout the area, drawing the attention of people.

Separating the wall of onlookers, a single girl stepped forward. She was holding a toy rifle in her hands, it looked like that was what had fired the cork bullet earlier.

She brushed her seemingly burning copper hair upwards, and threw a piercing glance with her jade green eyes.

"Maria....."

"Maria Highline!"

Around Lyle, the youth noble raised his voice in astonishment.

Maria, whose name was called out, answered with a sarcastic smile.

"Well well, look who we have here. Sir Gerim Schwatten, what kind of racket are you making, in the middle of the road?"

"..... Nothing much."

The youth with the burnt forelocks—Gerim answered while holding back his earlier overbearing attitude.

In response, Maria, with what looked like an expression of pity,

"It's 'nothing much'? Chasing two persons around with such great numbers, pouring cold water on such a fun festival and you call it nothing much?"

Gerim and his cronies did not have a response, in the face of Maria's ridiculing words.

"..... Well, whatever. If you say it's nothing much, then I won't say anything more. If you leave these two alone and leave, I'll overlook this issue."

"These two, you say? How absurd. In the first place it was Waldstein, who took this girl from us—"



"Took her from you? What was that? You can't be saying that you bought her? What a ridiculous anachronism. If that's the case, wouldn't you be engaging in slave trading?"

"Gu....."

"Oh yeah, by the way, I contributed a large sum of money to that troupe of itinerant entertainers from earlier. In doing so, their owner had *promised to transfer a portion of the rights of their entertainment business to me*>."

"What!"

To have bought the songstress girl—she was straightforward as usual, but this time, the business-inclined Maria's actions were several times more daring than said usual.

"What will you do? Although if you still want to go at it, there's no way I'll remain quiet, y'know?"

Maria declared assertively, and the audience who heartily agreed with her went, "That's right!", or "Go back to where you came from, moron nobles!", in loud voices.

Grinding their teeth in vexation, Gerim and his cronies glared at Maria. Though they wanted to depart, their pride as nobles would not allow them to run away shamelessly.

"You little..... !"

Just as Gerim was about to raise his lowered arm—

"—Cease your actions."

A composed and low voice reverberated through the air, and the group of youth nobles froze at the same time.

"Should a noble be raising his fists against a lady?"

The one who had stepped out saying that, was a tall young man. He was as well-dressed as Gerim and the others, but was it the longsword he carried at

his waist, or the air of confidence as he walked, that made it seem like he was one, two, or even more steps above them?

"Lord Vi-Vilhelm....."

Vilhelm Zest.

While still a student, he had already succeeded his family, the person who should be known as the Margrave Zest.

Maria who had been courted by such a young Margrave, wore an expression that seemed to show that she was feeling bothered.

"..... Speaking of which, weren't these guys were your followers, Lord Zest?"

"Speaking of which, this guy was your childhood friend, Miss Maria."

Vilhelm shifted his attention to Lyle. His powerful eyes were like sharpened blades that were without a single nick.

"—If they were the cause of the disturbance, then we shall withdraw right away..... Let us be off, Gerim. As Miss Maria had said, it would be pouring cold water on the festival should you go any further."

"B-But, Lord Vilhelm! Indeed, it is inelegant of us to make such a racket, but they have not yet apologised for my hair..... "

Said Gerim, displaying his burnt forelocks.

In an indifferent manner, Vilhelm contemplated, then nodded his head—and faster than the eyes could see, he drew his sword.

A flash of silver.

Leaving nothing besides an afterglow, he sheathed his sword, and Gerim's burnt forelocks gently fluttered through the air and onto the ground.

"—What about your hair?"

Although he had just displayed blindingly fast swordwork, Vilhelm's voice was in fact, calm. Even so, within that calmness was concealed a confidence and conceit about his own sword arm.



Though Gerim was more dumbfounded than anyone else, he shook his head so furiously it looked like something would come loose.

"We are done here. —Everyone, I apologise for the trouble they have caused. It would be my honour if you have obtained some form of amusement from that shoddy performance of mine."

With an elegant bow to the wide-eyed onlookers, Vilhelm Zest departed dashing. His followers, Gerim and his cronies, followed suit in a hurry.

Thanks to that, Lyle was at last released from the lock.

"Seriously, you're the same as always."

To Lyle who was easing his shoulders and wrists that had been gripped very hard, Maria pushed the toy rifle while smiling bitterly.

"You're smart, and yet you don't have that much sensibility. With that, you can't lead a comfortable life, can you?"

"I know that. More importantly, I must apologise for causing you trouble, Maria."

"I'm used to it. You've always been softhearted, after all."

Although she was sighing, Maria looked at Lyle with a light in her eyes that somehow gave the impression that she was proud of him.

"—So, who is that girl?"

"Oh, yeah....."

Upon looking at the silver-haired girl who had been struck down, he noticed that Milla had already appeared unnoticed and was skillfully tending to the girl.

"She has fainted. Furthermore, her body is severely weakened. It would be best if we brought her to a doctor immediately...."

"No, a doctor would not be able to help her."

Interrupting Milla's diagnosis, Lyle then lowered his voice.

"Rather than that, it would be better to supply her with magical power. That would heal most of her damage, and her physical strength should also return."

"What exactly is this girl?"

"I don't know the exact details, but..."

Lyle who was the target of Milla and Maria's gazes, stared at the girl's face, and said.

"A Phantasm using the magic of 'Bewitchment'. Most likely—She is a «Nosferatu»<sup>1</sup>."

Before they had realised it, the sun had begun to set, illuminating them with an amber light.

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<sup>1</sup> The kanji for Nosferatu means, 'Bloodline of the Night'.

## Chapter 2 - The Moonflower Princess

### Part 0

*She was fleeing.*

*The girl was fleeing.*

*Running away, further and further—she continued to run.*

*What was she running away from? Who was she trying to run away from? From what sort of place was she trying to run away from? Even leaving those questions behind, the girl ran, and ran, further and further away—and then she suddenly realised.*

*There was no need to run away. She did not have to flee. There was no reason for her to flee.*

*And so, the girl came to a stop.*

### Part 1

".....Hah. For now, it looks like she'll be fine."

As he stopped the <Oracio> chant, the light from the amber inserted onto the pocket watch dimmed like the setting sun. The job of illuminating the laboratory and its mountains of books and documents, was passed on to the brightness of the oil lamp.

Because of the trouble at the grounds of the performing arts festival, Lyle had carried the girl he saved to the laboratory of the academy. Considering the 'medical treatment' that had to be done for her, it would have been unthinkable if he had brought her to a poor location.

After placing her on the sofa, Lyle breathed the <Oracio> into the amber. As the exhausted girl took in the magical power of the amber, she quickly recovered.

"Thanks for the hard work."

Maria, who had watched the entire process from start to end, thanked him. Even though Maria was one of the few people who knew of Lyle's true identity, she was still astonished by the rate the girl recovered with the light of the amber.

"..... She really is no human, is she."

"By absorbing the magical power of amber she can then convert it into her lifeforce. Without a doubt, she's a Phantasm."

"Hmm. Well, if witches and magi exist, then something like Phantasms could also exist. —So? What are you going to do with her?"

"If possible, I'd like to return her to where she belongs. But first, let us enquire about her circumstances."

"I see. If that's the case, I'll be going home."

"I'll see you off till the main gate."

Putting on his overcoat, Lyle went with Maria towards the main entrance.

"..... Lyle. Was it because of the mage half of you that you saved her?"

"That seems to be the catalyst for it. But I guess the real reason would be that it was the right thing to do. Helping her, that is. Seeing her being harassed by a noble like Gerim, without thinking, I—"

"And then you stepped in", said Maria with an amazed expression while smiling wryly. She then continued, "Honestly..... You've always been one to take action before thinking, eh. After all, sensibility isn't your strong suit."

"You're right..... it'd be better for me to be more sensible and flexible."

Even though he himself thought so, Lyle could not change himself so easily. That part of him was his base nature. If he was at least a little bit more optimistic, he would be able to live up to Maria's expectations—

"———Yep, that's right. There wasn't any deeper meaning behind that, was there.... ?"

"Did you say something?"

"Nope, not at all."

After Lyle who was immersed in his thoughts had asked her, Maria shook her head, humming.

With that, they finally arrived at the main gate of the academy. Boarding the horse carriage that had been on standby,

"Good night, Lyle."

Said Maria as she waved her hand, and Lyle waved his hand in return, bidding her goodnight as well.

Milla who was seated at the coachman's position cracked her whip, and the horse carriage departed from the academy.



• • •

Milla nodded her head vigorously from coachman's seat through the compartment window towards Maria, who was trying to tear her breasts off in a panicked state.

"Yes. Whenever Master Lyle looks at Milady's chest, he is always unable to stop himself from ogling it."

".....W-What a relief....."

Maria slowly sat down.

Looking at her master who had swung from sorrow to joy, Milla said, with a smile,

"—How cute."

In the smallest of voices.

Although she put on airs as a 'woman' with both composure and charm, her master was still a 'girl'. If that was not cute, than what was? If she would be more honest in exposing this side of her, even that serious youth would throw himself at her.

While calmly analysing, Milla did not offer a suggestion. In place of that,

"Ah, however..... it is possible that he might have an interest in a totally different attribute."

"A-And what is that?"

"That is—"

Maria gulped in anticipation, waiting for the answer of Milla, who had lowered her voice.

"—————lolita."

In response to Milla's words, Maria's eyes were wide-open as though she had been struck by lightning.

"No way..... Lyle likes lolita..... how could he possibly like lolitaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Her back to Maria's pitiful scream, Milla, wearing a bright smile like a sunflower, closed the compartment window.

### Part 3

"....."

After sending Maria off and returning to the laboratory, Lyle found that the atmosphere in the room had completely changed.

Shafts of light from the bright half-moon shone in through the window, illuminating the girl who was rising up from the sofa. The moonlight seemed to flow around the girl's pale silver hair, trickling down her bare white shoulder.

The disorderly room filled with nothing but mountains of books, was quickly turned into a surreal fairytale-like setting.

And from the girl's large round eyes, was reflected a dusk-coloured light like a will-o'-the-wisp.

"..... Where am I.....?"

A clear voice leaked out from the girl's small lips. Though she was confused by having woken up at some unknown location, her voice was completely calm.

"This is my laboratory. Be at ease. It may be rather messy, but it's safe."

"..... You were the one who provided me with magical power, were you not?"

With a small nod, the girl gently got off the sofa. Her silken dress fluttered, like a pair of wings.

"..... I apologise for not introducing myself sooner. My name is Lunaria..... Lunaria D. Nebulablut<sup>1</sup>. I am a descendant of the 'Nosferatu'

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<sup>1</sup> Nebulablut. A *nebula* is an interstellar cloud of dust, hydrogen, helium and other ionised gases (wikipedia). Blut is German for *blood*. You'll understand the significance of this name later on.

who resided east of Ilsestein, and one of the 'Nebulablut'..... Would you kindly tell me your name?"

"—It's Lyle. Lyle Waldstein."

While introducing himself, Lyle realised that his guess had been spot on.

Vampire, Nachzehrer<sup>2</sup>, Methuselah<sup>3</sup>—Various names had been given to these beings with diverse and powerful abilities, as prominent proof of their might. The nobles who reigned during the night, they who were known as the «Nosferatu», were especially well-known even among the other Phantasms, and were also one of the most feared existences.

And she—Lunaria, seemed like she belonged to one of the considerably high ranked households among the «Nosferatu».

To the «Nosferatu», the 'Community Name' bore a special meaning. She who bore the Community Name as her Family Name, which was proof enough of the strength of her lineage, was, so to speak, something like a princess.

*—And so, why was someone like that alone by herself? Furthermore, also content with having that kind of social status?* Though the questions he had were many, Lyle could not ask them, for this was neither the place nor time to do so.

Suddenly, Lunaria went down on her knees, and pressed her head against the floor. Her pale silver hair spread out on the floor, revealing her white slender nape seductively.

"..... Though I am but a novice, I will serve you as far as this body allows. Please use me as you please, Master Lyle."

"Wa—?"

*Almost like she were a servant— No, those were obviously the speech and conduct of a slave,* thought Lyle as his mind went into a panic.

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<sup>2</sup> Nachzehrer are German vampires. The kanji used for Nachzehrer are 'Hunters of the Night'.

<sup>3</sup> Methuselah, according to the Hebrew Bible, was the oldest person to have lived. The kanji used in this case are, 'One who lives long'.

"R-Raise your head! Why are you—?"

"You ask me this, but....."

Lifting her head, Lunaria turned her glass-like eyes towards him.

"..... Master Lyle, are you not my new owner?"

"Owner, you say....."

"Master Lyle, you provided me with magical power. Was that not for the sake of keeping me as a 'Servant'?"

"....."

Lyle's thoughts were thrown into such a disarray that he became speechless.

The «Nosferatu» were proud and powerful Phantasms. They were the ones to use humans as 'Servants', the fact that the opposite could happen would never have crossed their minds.

"And so, what would you have me do? The provisioning of a catalyst? Taking care of daily necessities? Or should I service you through the night?"

"..... A— , u— ..... mgh....."

Although Lyle was trying to say something, he could not find the appropriate words. It was partially due to astonishment, but mainly it was because of the accumulated fatigue that he could not think very well. In the end, all he could manage was,

"..... Then, could you sing me a lullaby?"

"A lullaby?"

Lunaria tilted her head expressionlessly. Her blank look was indeed cute, but her movement was almost like she were a puppet that had its strings cut.

"..... To be honest, today was really tiring. That's why I want to go to sleep while feeling good by listening to a gentle and peaceful lullaby."

"..... Is that the first order you have for me?"

"It's not an order. I'm just asking a favour of you. You don't have to do it if you don't want to."

Lyle cleared the books from a corner of the room, creating a space large enough for one to lie on.

Using his overcoat as a replacement for the blanket, and a dictionary for the Galean language as a pillow, he laid down on the floor.

"There's a blanket on the other side of the sofa, go ahead and use it."

With emotionless eyes, Lunaria looked down at Lyle who was lying on the floor.

"—Ooooooooooh—"

She started her song.

A gentle voice spread through out the room, like a fog. Listening to her gentle singing voice, Lyle's tired consciousness slowly faded away.

*—Still, her voice seemed somewhat sorrowful.....*

Vaguely, he saw the figure of a girl who was lost within the deep fog.

"..... Good night, Lunaria....."

Calling out to the girl within the fog, Lyle fell asleep to the sound of the lullaby.

### Part 4

*–What kind of person is this human... ?*

Looking at the sleeping youth's face, Lunaria absent-mindedly thought.

Only just a few hours ago she had almost used up all of her magical power, and even the shoddy magic at the performance had caused her great difficulty. She had thought that her time was up.

She was not afraid. To begin with, her survival had been a mistake.

When that young noble had made his moves on her, she had come to an understanding that it was her end. Why did this youth endanger himself to save her, then? Surely, he must have had some sort of motive...

Lunaria shook her head. Whatever it was was inconsequential.

Taking out the blanket from the other side of the sofa, she threw off her dress and wrapped herself in it.

*–What is this smell?*

The blanket had a smell that was different from its material.

Though it was a little different from a smell from overuse, there was no problem with the blanket. Whether it was a old rag or whatnot, there was no need for her to be mindful about such details.

Just like any other night since she had come to the world of humans, Lunaria closed her eyes without thinking anything further.



### Part 5

The room was engulfed in a bittersweet smell.

The young man on the leather-covered sofa looked up at the ceiling grudgingly and exposed his trained upper body to the air.

The combination of both strength and beauty in that body, could be a sample of the golden ratio for humans.

Next to the young man, was sprawled a half-naked woman wrapped in bed sheets. Her sweat-covered form was shining glossily in the candlelight.

The young man looked at the body of the woman which stripped away a man's judgement,

"..... Hah."

And leaked out a sigh. And as though the sigh was a trigger, the door of the room was knocked upon.

"..... Enter."

While touching the long sword that was leaning against the back of the sofa, the young man gave his permission.

"—I apologise for troubling you at this time, Lord Vilhelm."

The first of the youths who entered after opening the door, the one with the unnaturally cut forelocks, bowed his head.

He was GerimSchwatten, the one who had chased Lyle and Lunaria at the performing arts festival.

"Ah, it's you guys. Excuse me for not being able to bring the situation to a close favourably earlier. So, are you all enjoying the night?"

This place was a clubhouse with a complete membership system located in the 'pleasure quarters' of the royal capital—in other words, a high class brothel for nobles.

"—It is thanks to Lord Vilhelm that we are able to enjoy ourselves tonight..... But the matter from earlier has been irking us. We cannot simply let it go like that. It is necessary for us to retaliate."

"And what are you implying?"

"Lyle Waldstein."

At Gerim's words, the rest of the noble youths nodded their heads.

"For a commoner like him that has enrolled into the school as a scholarship student who only knows how to suck up to the teachers to have brushed us off like that, we have damaged Lord Vilhelm's reputation."

"Though that did not really affect my reputation, hm?"

"Then, what about Maria Highline?"

"Ah, Miss Maria..... indeed, her slap was rather severe."

Stroking his cheek, Vilhelm smiled seemingly happily.

"Though I do want to teach that nouveau riche lass a lesson or two, but it can't be helped that she's the only daughter of the Highline Foundation's leader.... but if it's her favourite lad....."

A fervor filled his eyes, and Vilhelm nodded his head.

"Hmm..... Seeing as you're already this serious about it, then go ahead and try whatever you've been thinking of. I'll be looking forward to it, *and also watching you carefully.*"

"—Got it!"

Having obtained Vilhelm's approval, Gerim and the others snickered.

Scholarship students of Vergenheim, which was run by the royal institutions, were the hopes of the Kingdom of Ilsestein and her king for the future. Teaching that eyesore of a lad who was in that status his social position—the idea of that set their passions on fire.

"..... Base humans like that are easy to deal with."

To the youths who returned in high, exultant spirits, Vilhelm smiled bitterly.

—*That would be sufficient.* Vilhelm swirled his glass filled with wine around.

"..... If an opportunity presents itself, then I will take it. If those guys will lay the foundation for me, that would save me some effort."

"—What are you talking about, Lord Vilhelm?"

As he was smiling and sipping the wine, the woman lying sprawled called out to him.

Replying with a "It's nothing" while smiling, Vilhelm stroked her hair as though playing with it. With just that, her expression became intoxicated.

It was child's play for Vilhelm to give pleasure to a woman. And not just women. All humans wanted to be ruled by someone else. Putting it in a different way, they wanted to have their worth recognised by someone else.

It was important to recognise their worth, and not misread it.

"..... How much are you worth? Lyle Waldstein, «Disciple of the Last Hexe», he who ought to be the inheritor of the <Erbe>?"

With a faint smile, the young Margrave finished the rest of his wine.

### Part 6

The first thing Lyle did when he woke up was to turn his line of sight toward the sofa.

There was a substantial bulge in the blanket on the sofa in the middle of the room, and pale silver hair glimmered from the sunlight that slipped through the gap in the curtains.

"..... She's still here, huh."

Lyle murmured with a complicated expression on his face and left the laboratory while trying not to make a sound. He needed to first wash his face, hence he headed towards the washroom in the corridor.

From the other direction, opposite of where Lyle had gone, at the start of the staircase that was connected to the corridor,

"It's too rushed—"

"It's cool! I'm all dolled up and I won't give up. I have what a woman needs, both appearance and spirit!"

The copper haired person turned about, and the figure of Maria appeared. Her usually dignified jade green eyes were a little bloodshot, and beneath her eyes were faint signs of eye bags.

The maid Milla who was right behind her continued,

"However, Master Lyle is at that age, isn't he? A mistake or two is—"

"But however I try to approach him, he hasn't done anything back to me, y'know? F-For me to have made a mistake now.....!"

Facing the wall, Maria began to tremble like a frightened child.

"Please calm yourself down, Milady. Here here, it'll be alright."

Almost as though she were a mother, Milla hugged her, caressing her head, and Maria lifted her half-crying face.

"I-It'll be alright..... ?"

"Yes. Milady, you are the one who knows Lyle best. If Milady does not trust him, who will?"

"..... That, that's right. Thank you, Milla. That's right. There's no problem at all!"

Clenching her fist, Maria's determination was renewed. However, she was completely unaware of Milla's warm smile and gaze behind her.

Moving rapidly down the corridor, Maria energetically threw open the door to the familiar laboratory.

"Good morning! Ly—le....."

Maria's smile was frozen.

On the sofa that Lyle always slept on was a girl with pale silver hair.

The girl got up slowly. The blanket that was slipping off revealed a slender and delicate body that had not a single stitch of clothing on it.

"Y-Yes..... Good morning."

The girl might be weak in the mornings, as she bowed her head seemingly befuddled.

Maria then closed the door, speechless.

A second passed— two seconds—and exactly three seconds later,

"Milady!?"

The face of Maria, who had crumbled down on the spot, was entirely drained of blood. It looked like her spirit and soul were being sucked out of her body. Her eyes were empty, like a decomposing fish.

"Wow, interestin—No, no, how pitiful....."

"Maria?"

Just then, Lyle returned from washing his face. Rushing over to his collapsed childhood friend, Lyle then snapped his fingers, waved his hands, but she did not respond at all.

"..... What on earth happened?"

"I wonder what it could have been? She did not get enough sleep last night, so it could have very well been that, perhaps?"

"Maria did not get enough sleep? That's unusual, she always seems to fall into a terribly deep sleep easily."

"..... That's right."

Milla had just the slightest look of worry on her face.

### Part 7

"—And so?"

Dragging out a table and chairs from the nooks in the mountains of books, they then had the breakfast that Milla had brought. While savouring tea after the meal, Maria who had pretty much returned to her usual self, asked.

"Whatever it was, I haven't had the chance to ask her the details."

Lyle turned his gaze towards Lunaria who was in the interior of the room, dressed tentatively in a white shirt.

"—Lunaria."

"Yes, Master Lyle."

Lyle grimaced.

He had asked Lunaria to stop addressing him as 'Master' many times, yet she would not listen.

"..... You possess such high status within the «Nosferatu». How did you end up in a troupe of itinerant performers?"

"I was picked up."

"Picked up?"

Right after giving some sort of metaphor, Lunaria closed her mouth and ended her explanation.

"..... What she just said seems to be true."

Maria added, frowning, to Lyle who was scratching his neck.

"The people who had been using her said they had found her and taken her in while on a tour in the east. No one knew anything about her, not even her identity, but it looks like they had used her for their business because of her looks and voice."

"When did you learn that?"

"Yesterday, after leaving the academy, I changed my mind and paid a visit to the performing arts festival. Although initially it was an emergency measure to clean up the mess, I ended up being her guarantor on paper. And because of that, I asked for her background, and all they told me was that she was 'picked up'. That was all I got and, as you might expect, I was rather shocked."

Once again, their gazes were focused on Lunaria.

Lunaria, the target of everyone's stares, as expected, answered in an indifferent manner without so much as blinking an eye.

"That is the entire story. I am but a vagrant lass—nothing more, nothing less."

"That doesn't really tell us much...."

"If it is beyond your capabilities, then it would be fine to give up that notion."

Lunaria declared to the perplexed Lyle, as though it were somebody else's business.

"Please feel free to sell me to a slave market or even a brothel. You will be able to get some money out of it."

This time round, Lyle was rendered fully speechless.

Whether she was fine with it or resigned to her fate, it was her problem. Her degree of self-abandonment was so serious it would not be odd to think that she had thought of suicide before.

"..... I don't like this at all."

Ruffling her copper hair in frustration, Maria stood up suddenly. Taking up an imposing stance before Lunaria, she lashed out verbally without attempting to hide her displeasure, snorting.

"Although it's a little embarrassing to hear this coming from someone as ignorant of the ways of the world as me but—aren't you taking this too



lightly? There are those who have no choice but to sell their body in order to survive. But, you are not one of them."

"..... What do you mean?"

"Someone like you doesn't have the right to say that you're a slave, or whatever it is. A soulless corpse has no right to make light of the people who live their lives to the best of their ability!"

"... Then, please give me the appropriate treatment as a corpse would deserve."

Lunaria did not even show the slightest bit of resistance.

"I am an *existence that ought to disappear*. I will not lament my fate."

*An existence that ought to disappear.....?*

Lyle remembered that unease. He might not have had suitable words to say to one who had given up on everything, but,

*Somehow..... it's as though she's trying to set her heart on that....?*

"... Hmph."

Once again, Maria snorted at her, and abruptly turned towards Lyle.

"—And? What are you going to do with *it*?"

"'It'.....?"

"An object cannot be referred to as a human. That's why, calling it '*it*' will do."

It was rare for Maria to become this resentful. Usually, she was not so merciless, nor did she take digs at others with seemingly snide remarks.

"You're her guarantor on paper, aren't you? She's a girl after all, you should bring her back to your place—"

"I-don't-wanna-do-it. If you leave her to me, I'll go 'please dispose of this for me' at the health bureau and throw her away."

"Looks like I really have to do it..... Even so, a vagrant with no background nor a place to return to.... staying here will be a little....."

"Hm, isn't that fine? You could just use her like a pack mule."

"Even if you say that, I'm just a student, right? I can't do that in the dorm, anyway."

"Have you forgotten? Lyle, you're a scholarship student of Vergenheim, aren't you? You have various privileges and rights conferred upon you. Exemption of tuition fees, a scholarship allowance, authorisation to use the Royal Library—You also had a private laboratory provided, along with the right to hire an assistant."

"The privileges extended that far?"

He had only sat for the scholarship exam for the exemption for tuition fees, but it seemed that there had been some new additions since his matriculation.

"To be precise, although it is a category of the teaching staff guidelines, it's allowed for one to employ an assistant for the purpose of managing the laboratory. Of course, the wages are paid by the owner of the laboratory, but.... if she says that she's a slave, then there wouldn't be a problem. You can just provide the bare minimum of a roof and meals, give her some rags and then make her do the cleaning."

"Rags....."

Wrinkling his brows, Lyle looked at Lunaria, who nodded, still unsurprisingly expressionless.

"I do not mind. Please, use me as you wish, Master Lyle."

"See. Just work her to the bones as much as you want."

With that, Maria stood up while dusting her skirt off.

"You're heading back already?"

"I don't want to see *it* any more than I have to. You can just do whatever you want later."

Lyle raised both his hands as though raising the white flag at Maria.

"I got it. This is something I started, so I should be the one to see it through to the end."

"Well then, see you later."

Bringing Milla with her, Maria departed from the laboratory.

### Part 8

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHH! Lyle! Together with that sexually frigid womaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!"

"Honestly....."

Milla, at the coachman's position, could only muster an amazed expression at Maria's anguish inside the horse carriage.

"If you dislike it that much, then wouldn't it be better to simply forcibly make him yours?"

"Grrrrrrrrrr..... if that actually worked then I'd have done it a long time ago!"

Although Maria was groaning and crying out loud, she forced herself to calm down and reseated herself.

"..... But, that was a good stimulus. That laboratory shut-in, Lyle was rather shaken."

He had obtained the position of a scholarship student in Vergenheim Academy, and spent almost all of his time reading books. Naturally, he was serious during lessons, but everything taught in those were already like common sense to him.

Lyle had learnt a massive amount of knowledge from «The Last Hexe». While possessing that superb intelligence, he had spent most of his days quietly as a recluse.



"Lyle's talent is not something like that. Lyle Waldstein, whom Madam Erllua had called a 'genuine genius', is an even more haphazard person than that. Should he ever feel like it, even now, he could create a new 'impetus'—a second <Steam Engine Revolution>."

Though Maria had said that with confidence, her eyes still had a little hint of insecurity. The cool-headed mentor who was used to swaying others, was possibly a veteran at reading the thoughts of others.

"If possible, I'd like Lyle to be the one leading this civilisation of Steam technology forward with reform and innovation. For that purpose, necessary funds and environment have to be prepared—as well as stimulus. For that, that sexually frigid woman who has given up at life could be helpful. After all, Lyle is someone who cannot ignore a person in trouble."

"That's true.... Master Lyle has always been that kind of person after all. — However, Milady, I have just one concern."

"..... What is it?"

"Giving Master Lyle motivation is one thing, but a youth poking his nose into the affairs of a girl who has given up—doesn't that sound like a cliché script from the romance genre? His motivation could very well turn towards another direction....."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH! CRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAP! If by any chance it turns out like that, what-should-I-do-what-should-I-do..... Uu-Uugggh! LYLEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

Once again, Maria grabbed her head in agony.

Milla nodded her head as though relieved, and quietly closed the compartment window.

### Part 9

Without further ado, Lyle showed Lunaria around the academy grounds.

Lunaria had changed into her plain clothes. Maria had brought them there last night. The grounds of Vergenheim Academy were vast, and freshmen that got lost there were often described as being 'stranded'.

Even though it was a holiday, they were spotted by some people when he was showing her around. Some were reading, others seemed to be bored, but when Lyle and Lunaria passed by, they all turned their heads towards them simultaneously. Some of the guys were stunned and it seemed as though their souls were leaving their bodies.

*Well..... I guess that's how it is.*

Lyle thought as he looked down at Lunaria walking directly beside him.

Her clothes clearly showed the amount of time she had spent as a vagrant through how worn out they were, but even so her graceful looks and pale silver hair had not lost its lustre. With the air of a daughter of a fallen noble family, Lunaria stood out and gave off a tranquil atmosphere.

It was inevitable that she would captivate them.

*It may seem like that from an outsider's perspective, but in truth....*

Although Lyle was pointing out and explaining the various landmarks of buildings and plants, Lunaria merely nodded with an expression that did not indicate whether or not she understood.

Between them was only emptiness similar to trying to catch wind with a net.

Wearing a complicated expression, they continued walking, and the bonfire that was kept burning brightly even through the day came into view. The origin of the name 'SpringfireFestival', was a flame that burns through winter till spring.

"Yo, good morning, Lyle. How was last night? Were you able to enjoy yourself together with that noblewoman—"

Hazel who was watching over the bonfire just like yesterday, froze in place after looking over at Lyle. His eyes were fixated on Lunaria, who was standing next to Lyle.

"..... Lyle. Who is she?"

"Ah, she's called Lunaria—"

"Lunaria! What a beautiful name!"

Crying out while overcome with emotion, Hazel nimbly knelt down in front of Lunaria.

"—O beautiful maiden, your beautiful visage is like a fleeting dream, reminiscent of the moon suspended in the sky, making my heart thump unceasingly inside my chest..... Forgive me for not introducing myself earlier. I am Hazel, Hazel Clairry. This may be a little sudden, and you may be a little surprised, but—Lady Lunaria, please marry me!"

While Lyle was still watching on dumbfoundedly, Hazel grasped Lunaria's hand, seemingly full of emotion.

"You might be thinking, 'What is he saying?'. We are still young, and I am but a mere student. However, Lady Lunaria, if you would stay by my side, no matter what kind of trials or difficulties that may stand in our way, we will be able to make it through together! Will you grant me this courage to brave through anything?"

It was almost like a line out of a comedy, but the person in question had a very serious expression on his face.

And, Lunaria who had been confessed to, replied thus,

"—I am truly sorry, but I cannot attend to anyone besides Master Lyle."

She had said something shocking in an indifferent manner.

".....Lyleee~?"

His smile twisted, Hazel turned around to face Lyle.



".....This innocent maiden, what is she to you?"

"'What', you ask..."

"Every strand of hair, every nail, everything of this body is the property of Master Lyle. That is why I cannot be with you."

She landed the finishing blow.

Stepping backwards unsteadily, Hazel then looked up at the sky in a kneeling posture as though in prayer.

"OO-OOOOOHHH! OH, THE GODS! Why hast thou bestowed upon that one human so many gifts! He who is unsatisfied with overflowing large breasts, even laying his hands on delicate and slender flat chests..... OO-OOO-OOOOOOOHHH! THERE ARE NO GODS! THE GODS HAVE DIED! DIED!"

"Um, Hazel..... ?"

"Shut up you pervert in disguise!"

Crying buckets of tears, Hazel glared at Lyle.

"Someone like you... should just rot away and die!"

Before he could even ask what that was about, Hazel had run away while wiping his tears.

"..... Did you hear that?"

"..... Yeah, I sure did. That damn Lyle Waldstein....."

"..... A scholarship student forming a harem inside his laboratory..... Shit, I'm sweating from my eyes..... !" !"

"....."

Piercing glares were coming from the surroundings, and Lyle broke out in cold sweat.

"Lunaria.... that way of phrasing it is a little..... "

"Did I say something wrong?"

Saying that without emotion, Lunaria looked back at Lyle.

"I do not think that I have been mistaken in saying that I am serving Master Lyle."

"You're seriously saying that, eh..... ? Well, it's Hazel, he'll probably forget about it by tomorrow.... Ah, come to think of it."

He had thought of something because of what Hazel had said earlier, and Lyle asked Lunaria a question.

"I know it's rude of me to be asking a girl this, but Lunaria, how old are you?"

Phantasms in general lived far longer than humans. For example, there were many «Elves» that had lived for over a thousand years. And furthermore, their appearances did not change much even after living that long.

Lunaria's appearance was that of a human in her early teenage years, but it was possible that she was even older than Lyle. If that was the case, he would have to rethink how he should address her.

"I am sixteen."

"Sixteen!? The same age as I am?"

"Yes. Among those who share my bloodline, I am the youngest."

Appearances could be deceiving, but after being told the answer that she was of the same age, it was nevertheless shocking to know.

She might have been a Phantasm, but there should not be a great difference from humans at which their minds mature. It would have been great if she were more innocent and curious.

"..... What is it?"

In a hollow, echo-like voice, Lunaria asked the rendered mute Lyle.

*What on earth could have happened to make a sixteen year old girl this way?*

He frowned at this doll-like person, and her lack of both emotion and expression. She was almost like a living corpse.

Thinking that, Lyle felt rage welling up inside him.

Because she was probably of extraordinary lineage, something like this was totally wrong, he strongly believed. She believed that she had ought to disappear, and the emptiness inside her, those were things that Lyle could not possibly tolerate.

"..... That reminds me."

Semi-forcibly taking Lunaria's hand in his own, Lyle changed direction and headed off in a different way.

"..... Master Lyle?"

"Let's go to the town. Because it's the Springfire Festival, there will be people all over the place."

And so, Lunaria who had an indistinct look on her face, was dragged along by Lyle.

### Page 10

Vergenheim Academy, which was located at the outskirts, had tram routes running through it.

To the group of people who were staying in the overcrowded dormitory, the tram service was a lifesaver. As long as they presented their student card, it was free of charge.

After flashing his student card and paying for Lunaria, they then sat down on some empty seats. When they boarded the tram, it was not so crowded, but as it travelled, passengers started flowing in at an exceptional rate. The sound of the whistle that marked the tram's departure seemed as though it was running out of steam.

Lyle's destination was the shopping street near the remains of the old outer wall. One of the times that this place was truly active with human activity was during this period of the Springfire Festival, with throngs of sightseers and people. The size of the crowds there would not lose to even the central government district's.

After alighting, the first location that Lyle brought Lunaria to was a familiar boutique.

".....What is this place?"

"Of all the stores that sell female clothing that I know of, this one has the greatest variety."

"That is not what I meant..... why a boutique?"

"Going to a place that sells clothing for the purpose of buying clothing, normally that's what you would think."

"Welcome, Mr Lyle."

The salesgirl he was acquainted with greeted him. Seeing that the girl next to Lyle was not the copper haired noblewoman, she whispered to him with a smile of complicity.

"—Are you two-timing?"

"Please don't suspect me of those weird things, and pick something nice out for her."

After he glared at her, the salesgirl went 'scary, scary' with a smile, and pushed Lunaria by her back.

—Over ten minutes later.

"How about something like this?"

Whether the newly debuted Lunaria's appearance was strange or unusual, he did not know. She was dressed in the clothes resembling the black dress that she wore the first time Lyle had seen her. A pure-white blouse, a black jacket and dress that was conservatively adorned with cuffs and collars. On her breast was a stitched red ribbon ornament.

And just as he thought, the most eye-catching part of Lunaria's appearance was her gentling swaying pale silver hair, and her white, snow-like skin. And what made them stand out was the colour of the night sky, black.

"Um..... Master Lyle...."

"If it's about money, you don't have to worry. Recently, I got around to finally selling the mansion that I used to live in, and because of that I've got some money to spare."

She seemed as though she had wanted to say something like 'these clothes are unnecessary', and he had stopped her before she could do so.

".....If you say so, Master Lyle."

She seemed to be more or less bewildered, but Lunaria promptly sank into silence, much like a dress-up doll.

*The shopping strategy was a failure, huh.....?*

Realising that he had lost the first round, Lyle renewed his determination and thought that 'the real fight has not yet started'.

Bringing along Lunaria, whose appearance had been settled, Lyle set off for the next destination.

Part 11

*—I don't understand him at all.*

While savouring the bitter taste of coffee for the first time at a cafe, Lunaria looked vacantly at the youth who was facing her.

*—What on earth could be this young magus' motive be in dragging me around?*

At the moment, the youth who had hired her—Lyle Waldstein, was throwing a large amount of sugar into his coffee and stirring it conscientiously with his spoon.

He, who was a pupil of the now outdated magic and also a student at the same time, was treating her very well indeed.

However, whether it was due to his virtue or softheartedness—he was still just a normal student.

*.....How pointless.*

Though it seemed that this youth had saved her out of goodwill, that sort of kindness was completely wasted on her.

It was just like that Maria girl said, she was as good as a 'corpse'.

And a corpse had *nothing*.

Thus, it did not matter what she was given. Clothes, rags, they were all the same to her.

"Is it good?"

Lyle asked innocently, all while seeming like he had no taste for it or anything, given the amount of sugar he had added in.

".....Yes."

"Is that so? That's good to hear."

Lyle nodded and smiled back at her. It was a completely natural smile, with no special motive behind it. This youth was surely someone who helped others out of pure kindness, she thought.

However, a corpse could not be saved by that. In the first place, there was no need to save her.

*If only he would use me as a 'consumable good' as soon as possible....*

Inside her cold heart were feelings akin to sympathy, but Lunaria did not realise that. She did not care however she was treated.

"Well then, let's go."

Leaving some small change on the table, Lyle got up.

Lunaria followed behind Lyle in silence.

I do not care. Be it out of ill will or goodwill, I do not care.

—That is why,

"Ah....."

She did not care about the fact that she had her mouth covered and then grabbed from behind either.



### Part 12

"Hm?Lunaria?"

Turning backwards, he found that Lunaria was not there. Looking around immediately, he could not see a single trace of that conspicuous appearance of her's.

While he was scratching his chin thinking of what to do, a crudely-dressed young boy showed up right before him.

"Are you the one called 'Lyle'?"

"Yep, what about it?"

The boy thrust out a letter at him.

Opening the letter even while thinking that it was suspicious, Lyle's expression hardened and he looked back at the boy.

".....Who gave this to you?"

"Some cocky 'n' really well-dressed guy, that you coulda told was a noble straight from one look gave it to me."

From just that, he understood the situation. Lyle held up the many strands of hair had been inserted in the letter—the silver hair that seemed to have had its luster dulled, and he exhaled a breath in rage.

".....I got it. Will you show me the way?"

The boy curtly nodded his head, and headed off with Lyle.

Although it was currently a commercial district overflowing and rife with human activity, it used to be a haunt for the lower class citizens.

Accompanying the expansion of the royal capital, intensive development was focused on this area which had a low price for the land. However, deeper inside, beneath the exterior, it was filled full of cheap, decrepit buildings.

The place that Lyle was brought to, was a gloomy back street like that.

"We're almost there. If you're thinking of running away, now's your chance."

"Maybe I should."

"Hmm? You've got some guts there."

"I'm not always like this. Ah, that's right. I'll pass you this first."

Producing a silver coin from his purse, Lyle held it out to the boy.

"Probably after this, the demand for you as a messenger will drop, so I'll pay for that in advance."

".....You realise I'm their accomplice in all this trouble they are putting you through?"

"That's a problem between me and them, it's got nothing to do with you. And, appropriate compensation should be paid for manual labour. I don't know much about this sort of thing, but it's easy to guess what they're thinking."

Gazing intently at the silver coin in Lyle's palm, the boy then took it without a word.

And then finally, they arrived at a gapingly wide plot of vacant land that was surrounded by buildings. It looked like it had been left alone as a storehouse for materials.

The youths that were seated on the abandoned stone and lumber, stood up at the sight of Lyle.

They numbered five in total. It was as the boy had said, they were 'really well-dressed'.

"So, you came."

The youth who seemed like he was in control glowered at Lyle. A faint recollection flashed through his mind. The youth who had been trying to take advantage of Lunaria before he saved her—GerimSchwatten.

"You did well."

Nodding arrogantly at the boy who had brought Lyle there, Gerim tossed him a silver coin.

".....Didn't we agree on two silver coins?"

"Silence, servant. A portion was deducted because you were slow. Now get lost."

Astonished, the boy glared at Gerim, then looked at Lyle as though in admiration. Seeming somewhat embarrassed, the boy said, 'see ya' to Lyle, and turned around.

After the boy departed, it was natural that they would block all the exits.

"Well then..... Lyle Waldstein. Do you know why you were called here?"

"How would I know? Unfortunately, I'm not as bright as you think I am."

"Well said. It's exactly that. That is the reason."

Gerim said scornfully. The others around too, shifted their attention to him with contempt.

"The fact that a commoner the likes of you could become a scholarship student of the glorious Vergenheim..... what a joke. Just because your name is known and you are liked by some of the teachers."

Taking ten subjects and three different languages, going through five interviews, and saying that he passed his exams only due to Erllua's name—spouting out those reasons, there was no helping this guy.

".....I didn't use my master's name—"

"Silence! You're just a mere commoner, do not speak as though you know anything before us nobles!"

*The heck*, Lyle thought.

He had not done anything to rub him the wrong way. It was probably *jealousy*. It seemed that no matter which generation they were in, nobles were simply too prideful..... it was that simple a matter.

Shocked, Lyle closed his mouth. Gerim and the others, misunderstanding that Lyle had been overwhelmed in the mental battle, sneered at him.

"Well..... It would have been impossible with just your mentor's name. Erllua Azoth, that highly praised genius, must have left you something as well, right? Something that promises you good treatment. Perhaps the rumoured <Erbe Der Last Hexe>?"

"....."

"I don't know what it is, but you must have gained something from the inheritance of your mentor. After all, you could not have possibly done all that by yourself. Isn't that right, «Disciple of the Last Hexe»?"

".....How dare you say that."

The young nobles frowned.

And at that moment, Lyle was unusually angered.

At the very least, his position as a scholarship student was something he had earned through his own merit and effort.

Yes—with the knowledge and wisdom imparted to him from Erllua.

Whatever it was about the power from the <Erbe Der Last Hexe> or whatnot, they had even looked down on Erllua. That *could not* be condoned.

Shuddering, Lyle faced them and their sneers.

".....I couldn't have done all that by myself? Doesn't that sound like you guys instead? You bunch of 'great' nobles' sons, who couldn't have kidnapped a girl alone and had to group up to do so?"

"W-Why you.....!"

"Now you've done it!"

The youths' faces turned red with anger at Lyle's verbal jabs. Picking up the scattered timber and metal rods, they glared at Lyle with clear intention for violence.

".....Do you understand the reason we have brought you to this stinking, run-down place? Whatever happens here, it'll be because of the work of hoodlums and ruffians. No matter what you say, eh? —Do us a favour, don't run away, will you? If you escape, we'll have the girl pay us back for your share."

The youth who was restraining Lunaria lifted her jaw up in display.

Lunaria had an unimpressed expression and was not doing anything to resist.

Lyle felt thoroughly sickened.

".....Will you hear me out on something?"

"Very well. I'll allow just one last, parting request from the weak."

"Let Lunaria go right now. If you let her go right now and swear not to have anything to do with her after this, I'll let you off painlessly."

The young nobles had their jaws agape for a moment, and then broke out in guffaws.

"Haha, are you a dimwit? *You* are the one who's going to be in pain!"

The large youth closest to Lyle, swung the piece of lumber in his hand down at Lyle—but it passed through only air.

"Huh?"

"—The human field of vision only covers two hundred degrees horizontally."

The youth that had missed, with excess momentum throwing him off, heard the voice coming from the right of his back.

"The field of vision that can adapt to movement is even smaller<sup>1</sup>. Just a word of advice—"

As the youth turned immediately to face his back,

"The human body is a delicate mechanism. Hence—"

Lyle grabbed his wrist, and swept him off his feet. With just that, Lyle readily felled the youth who was of a much larger size than him.

"The centre of gravity, the trunk, the posture, the limits of mobility—in this delicate mechanism, there will surely be weak spots."

Placing his knee on a certain point on the back, Lyle had completely sealed the movements of the pinned-down youth.

The sound of the lumber falling out from the youth's hand and onto the ground resounded.

The surrounding youths—even Lunaria—were wide-eyed in amazement at the deft skill that they had just seen.

"I apologise for not living up to your expectations, but I did use to get caught up in brawls often."

In any case, he had been dragged back and forth by his tomboyish childhood friend back in his childhood days. He had been involved in fights countless times. It was due to that, that he was well versed in how the human body worked in relation with physics.

"Grr..... You....."

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<sup>1</sup> This should be something called 'perceptual adaptation'. Basically, what that bit is trying to say is that the field of vision that is adaptable to changes in vision is less than the normal field of vision. For more information, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perceptual\\_adaptation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perceptual_adaptation)

Slowly, the surrounding youths shortened the distance between. If they came all at once, it would not go well.

That was correct. What little he had learnt from those fights could only help him overcome a foe with surprise.

Which was why—

"GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

He had jabbed his index finger into a point on the back of the pinned down youth's neck.

It was a piercing scream that threw the surrounding foes into panic.

".....In the human body, there are places known as the 'nerve plexus' where the various nerves intersect."

He said in a monotone, as though giving a lecture, and then Lyle twisted his index finger further.

"ARGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"This is a little something called 'acupuncture' from the East. The point I am pressing on is one of the vital points of that."

The sound of grinding.

And screams of deathly agony filled the back street.

"With this, let us continue with our negotiation. Release her, and I will cease to torment him. If you refuse, I'll make you all taste the same pain he did."

All of them were stupefied at Lyle's sudden change in behaviour. It was as though a switch had been flipped in him.

*—Is he really Lyle Waldstein?*

The atmosphere of the kind, softhearted honours student had vanished, and it was almost like they were but roadside pebbles—no, as if he were only

looking at 'numbers' written on a paper. The simple tranquillity of accumulated calculations and impartiality without emotion.

Gerim and the others were assailed by realistic delusions as they were being stared down by Lyle.

And the person in question, Lyle, was also very conscious of his own self.

The thought processes of the conspirators were easy to predict. They would not have let that pass so easily, by just simply thinking that 'we are the victims'. They, who had the advantage, were not able to bear the shame, their shallow and superficial thoughts, their baseness—it was easier than calculus.

Calmly analysing their inner thoughts, Lyle then grew disgusted with himself.

Reading their hearts as though he were reading numerical formulae, he hated himself for it. It was like he were scorning the souls of humans.

—Thinking that, his finger that had been pressed onto the pressure point slackened.

That was how fearsome the power of intelligence was.

"So, what will you do? Don't you think he would appreciate it if you would make up your minds before he goes mad?"

He repeated himself once more, his words and tone dangerous yet indifferent. If he seemed composed like that, these guys might just do as he said.

And most of all, in this kind of place—

"D-Damnabable bastard.....!"

Casting aside the metal rod he held in his hands, Gerim produced a metal mass from his purse—a small revolver that was giving off a black lustre.

*—Just as I suspected, he's got a last resort.*



Lyle sighed dejectedly at Gerim who was pointing his muzzle at him while shivering, his mind a mess.

### Part 13

If she had wanted to run away, she could have done so at any time.

If it were before she had regained her magical power, that would not have been so certain. But the her of now, with plenty of that, it would be like taking candy from a baby.

However, she did not have any will to defend or resist.

In that manner, Lunaria had been brought there. And the ones who had done so, were the young nobles who had chased her around at the performing arts festival before.

"If you're obedient, we won't do anything bad to you. And wouldn't you prefer to be loved by us, rather than being kept by that boring brat?"

Lunaria neither confirmed nor denied it. She did not care. Even if her clothes were torn off and she were pushed down onto the ground, she would not have cared.

And so, when that youth had turned up, foolishly and naively,

*He is unable to understand that it is a fruitless effort, truly, what a softhearted person....*

Lunaria felt sympathy for him from the bottom of her heart.

If he were to experience pain, perhaps he would finally be able to realise that—and immediately after she had thought that, Lyle had knocked down one of them, and requested for an exchange of hostages. His way of doing it was merciless, to the extent that she felt admiration.

And each time they heard the scream of their comrade as though on the brink of insanity, the surrounding young nobles were visibly disturbed.

"Y-You little bastard.....!"

The youth who was in control, the one named Gerim, had taken something out of his purse. And what he had taken out, the mass of metal that gave off a black lustre, captivated Lunaria.

"You little..... Don't screw around with me!"

Even when Gerim had pointed the muzzle at him, Lyle did not look fearful, but rather faced Gerim head on with a look of pity.

"You sure about that? With blunt weapons, this could still be covered up as a brawl..... But if you bring that out, it would be in the category of an incident. For example, intimidation or attempted murder. Am I really worth the trouble?"

"Shut up! Stop talking as though you're the one in control!"

Gerim replied, his spittle flying, to Lyle who seemed to be warning him. "Oi, that's not a good idea....", said his surrounding comrades, and then Gerim lowered the gun.

".....You bastard, always..... with that arrogant face, strutting around like you own the place..... looking down on us!"

"That's just what you think..... if you think you're being looked down upon, it's not because you guys are nobles. Isn't that simply because of the fact that you guys have become sluggards due to your already existing wealth?"

"What! W-W-W-Why you....."

With deep fury, the muzzle began to shake violently.

"Admit it. You're someone that simply cannot accomplish anything on your own."

"Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-You b-b-bastaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaard!"

The finger that was trembling with anger, readily pulled the trigger.

The gunshot resounded, and Lyle was blown backwards.

The youths who had watched on as Lyle demonstrated what pain was, and the youth who had been pinned down by, all of them lost the colour in their faces at this sudden act of violence.

".....W-What have you.....?"

"Oi, that's bad, that's seriously bad!"

"Shut up! There's no other way now that we've come this far! First, we need a place to hide the body—"

In the midst of the chaos, Lunaria stared at the fallen Lyle.

Clogging up her nose was the smell of iron and oil.

"A..... Ah....."

—The muzzles that were lined up in a row—the flashes of gunfire that ripped through the darkness—the spurting of crimson blood in succession—the bodies of fallen brethren—the nightmare-like memory washing over her mind, overlapped with the scene before her eyes.

"A-Ah..... Aaaah....."

"Hm? What is it.....?"

The young noble that was restraining Lunaria commented. The suddenly trembling Lunaria seemed almost as though she were going insane.

Breaking out in perspiration, shaking, and those trembling pupils. Those were the typical symptoms of a panic attack.

"A-Aah....."

AA  
AAAHHHHHHHHH!!"

Together with Lunaria's frightening scream, the [Fog] manifested explosively.

"Wha!"

"Uaaaargh!"

The youth that was restraining Lunaria was blown off by the sheer pressure of the [Fog].

The [Fog] that was capable of physical force, was swirling around the distressed Lunaria in a vortex. And the vortex of [Fog] seemed to resemble a snake rearing its head as it rushed towards Gerim, who had the revolver in his hand.

"WHOAAAA!"

Even forgetting to pull the trigger, Gerim threw aside the gun reflexively and it was smashed by the indistinct jaws of the vague snake of [Fog]. A spontaneously discharged bullet ricocheted off the ground and walls.

The youths were overcome with surprise from the sound of the gunfire and the gun being turned into scrap metal, and they cowered in fear.

At the centre of the squirming white [Fog], the girl stood swaying, as though she were a revenant. Her silver hair rustling even with the lack of wind, her eyes flashing with the colour of dusk.

"M-Mo.....Monster— !"

As the scene that went beyond human comprehension unfolded before their eyes, the sons of nobles fled at full speed.

And Lunaria's glowing Eyes of Amber, turned towards the moving people by reflex.

The [Fog] that had smashed the revolver into bits became countless snakes, and went after the fleeing youths.

"—Wait!"

The voice, together with the travelling intangible shockwaves, literally dispersed the snakes of [Fog].

"—You can't kill them, Lunaria."

While grasping tightly the pocket watch giving off the light of magical excitation, Lyle cut off Lunaria's path.

### Part 14

"—This doesn't look good."

The bullet fired from the gun had went off in a completely different direction due to excessive trembling and Lyle had not suffered a single wound. He had planned to escape once there was an opportunity to do so, but seeing the abruptly rampaging Lunaria, he could not play dead any longer.

Lunaria's eyes, framed by her pale silver hair, were blazingly glowing with the colour of dusk.

Clad in the squirming, seemingly sentient [Fog], it was a fitting image for a «Nosferatu».

"———a..... aaAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!"

*Here it comes!*

Just as he jumped back, the [Fog] shaved off a bit of the ground Lyle had been standing on. As he wondered how much power that must have carried, the bit of the ground that the [Fog] had shaved off seemed to be being compressed in its 'maw'.

"If I get caught by that, even my bones will be ground to dust.....!"

Lyle who had been calm even at gunpoint, had a stiffened expression.

The [Fog] that was being spewed out from Lunaria's body was, in truth, the manifestation of magical power with the appearance of a fog, Lyle guessed. The evidence that supported that theory was that it had been dispersed when he had thrown a pure lump of magical power at it earlier.

Magical power was an energy that distorted reality.

The Phantasms, who had magical power stored within their bodies, could be said to be the embodiment of 'magic' itself. They simply could not be compared with the mages who constructed their 'magic' from reality's laws of physics.





"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Lyle managed to consistently evade the attacking [Fog] with a paper-thin margin by running and tumbling. In the blink of an eye, the raw materials that had been piled up in the open space had been smashed up.

"I somehow managed to dodge, but.....!"

Lunaria seemed to have lost her sanity.

Those Eyes of Amber that were giving off the light of magical excitation seemed blurred, as though clouded by the fog. It looked like she had entered a panic attack due to an intense psychological shock.

It was easy to read the actions of one that had lost the ability to think rationally and merely acted on instinct. That was why, he could dodge—but his opponent was the [Fog].

The indeterminate form that could alter its shape glided along the ground, and stretched upwards in the air like a branch, surrounding Lyle.

"——That which exists at the end of light, the end of darkness. That which denotes the origin of wind, the origin of fire.——"

Chanting the <Oracio> and drawing out the magical power from the amber, Lyle constructed the 'magic' that distorted the rules of reality.

*Muscle strength alteration— !*

It raised the output of his muscle fibres, a 'reinforcement' that boosted the user's motion capabilities by several times.

Jumping around like a grasshopper, Lyle dived into the shadow of the stone blocks. Catching his breath there, he held out the lid of the pocket watch as a replacement for a mirror while under cover.

The Lunaria that he could see reflected off the lid was prowling about swaying unsteadily, having lost sight of Lyle who had suddenly increased his speed.

*I'll wait it out until she regains her sanity..... though I may be hoping for a little too much here.*

It would cause great havoc if the her of now were to go out onto the main street. He had to subdue her right here promptly, in this place.

Grabbing a handy, near-by rock, Lyle begun on a new form of magecraft.

*Soil composition—temperature—humidity—reverberation—grasped. Begin construction of 'magic'———*

Lyle threw the rock from behind cover. A different direction from where Lunaria was—however, all the pebbles that were on the ground, resounded with the sound of the falling rock.

*\*Paaaaaan\*—*

It sounded rather similar to the gunshot earlier.

With a start, Lunaria's body trembled, and sent the [Fog] in the direction of the sound. The [Fog] rushed onwards, to destroy the source of the imaginary gunshot.

Lyle then threw another rock from behind cover, again.

This time round, he threw it towards Lunaria. Although she had lost her sense of self and was only reacting in self-defense, Lunaria pulverised the rock that had been thrown at her with the [Fog],

*—\*Sploosh\**

The sudden mud that sprung forth threw Lunaria, who had turned around, off balance. With the abrupt change in circumstances, the [Fog]—was halted, a conditional reflex.

The alteration of sound had utilised the fineness of the air and manipulated the level of humidity.

With just that trivial bit of magic, Lyle had stopped the [Fog]. He then ran up to Lunaria—and dealt with her with the appropriate action for someone who had lost her sense of self.

"—Sorry!"

\*Paan!\*

The body of Lunaria, who had her cheeks struck, staggered, and Lyle caught her in his arms tightly.

"..... Mas... ter... Lyle.....?"

Lunaria whispered in blank amazement. The glow of her Eyes of Amber was extinguished, and the [Fog] vanished.

"Are you alright?"

"Ah, yes....."

Though she had replied with that, her head immediately jolted, and she seemed completely exhausted. It looked like all of the accumulated weariness and fatigue from the sudden magecraft that she had used, and the shock that she had suffered to her heart, had assailed her all at once.

While breaking out in cold sweat, Lyle frantically supported the fainted Lunaria. His brows wrinkled in order to bear the weight of the petite girl.

".....Ugh, the strain...."

His torn muscle fibres were burning hot, and tingling pain erupted all over his body.

That was the backlash of the magic.

Although body altering magic could be said to be relatively easy to perform, the 'aftershock' of it was indeed intense.

Bearing Lunaria on his back and grimacing due to the terrible state of his muscles, Lyle retraced his steps to the main street to find a horse carriage.

### Part 15

"Hah.... hah..... W-What the hell was that?"

The fog had come at them with hostility—and the young nobles had ran as fast as they could away from it, their faces deathly pale as though they had seen an apparition from the fairy-tales.

Abruptly, the youth at the end pitched forward, falling to the ground.

Startled, the remaining four of them spun around, and a pair of women's boots came into view.

".....Well well, you guys have been up to no good, haven't you?"

The figure of the culprit showed herself along with the voice.

Her copper hair was brilliant even in the gloomy back street, and so were her jade-green eyes.

"Ma-Maria Highline....."

"You understand, don't you? About what you guys have done?"

What was burning within those jade-green eyes was unmistakably rage. And then Maria snarled, much like a lioness would.

"You know what they all say—An eye for an eye!"

No sooner than she had said that, Maria brandished the long cloth package that she was carrying on her bag and stepped forward.

"Geh!"

Maria's attack was merciless. Swinging around the weaponised cloth package like a baton, she delivered strong blows to the youths' guts and vitals. Some of them tried to put up a fight, but,

"This woman—Argh!"

As the incoming cloth package was blocked with a fist, something else had sunk right into the abdomen. And to the winded youth's nose, Maria delivered a terrific headbutt.

It was crude and without elegance, but that way of fighting was effective and got them right where it hurt. At any rate, she seemed like she had learnt some form of close combat technique.

Before they could even do anything, Maria had wiped the floor with four of the youths, whose adulthood were limited to their bodies only.

"W-Why did w-we all get....."

The remaining Gerim leaked out a trembling voice.

Maria glared with unabated anger at Gerim, who was clearly thinking 'why is she looking at me with those eyes?'.

".....Do you have any idea why I've left you out?"

Maria unwrapped the cloth package in her hands. The cloth gently falling to the ground, she revealed a rifle made of cutting-edge technology, and the scent of wood could be detected.

Taking a bullet from her pocket, Maria loaded it with experienced movements. With the sound of the bolt falling into place, she aimed the rifle directly at Gerim.

"Wa—? Wh-Wh—?"

"Don't think badly of me for this. A lesson needs to be taught to the prey who return from the battlefield."

The muzzle that did not move even when she spoke, the legs that had naturally been placed in position, and the two hands that held the rifle as though it were an extension of herself. These clearly showed that she was no amateur, far better than words could.

"I could overlook your passes at Lyle—but you actually attacked him."

"Wa-Wait, I can explain—"

"Silence, lowlife!"

The gunshot rang far louder than that of the revolver, and the bullet of the rifle flew as Maria had aimed, right through Gerim's right arm, and smashed a wooden box that was lying on the ground.

".....Eh?"

Because of the sensation of scorching heat in his right arm, he was a little late in noticing. Pressing on his wound, Gerim rolled about on the ground, screaming,

"GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! My arm! MY AAAAAAAAAAAAAARM!"

"Shut up! It's just a flesh wound, you know!"

Close to where Gerim was writhing about, she slammed the gunstock onto the ground. Looking down at the abruptly silenced Gerim, Maria continued, an annoyed expression on her face.

"If it were up to me, I'd have shot all four limbs of yours. Lyle wouldn't like that, so I guess you should thank him."

Saying that, she brushed her copper hair upwards, and finally it seemed that she had calmed down.

"—Milady."

Milla who had been waiting for Maria to clean things up, called out. Her expression was one of heartfelt relief, and,

"I was so anxious."

"At which part? These aren't people whom I would need your help for."

"No, I was worried whether you might cross the line."

"I won't kill them, not these guys."

Maria poked the fainted youths with the heel of her boot.

"What a waste of bullet and coin..... hm?"

Lifting her head, she stared at the darkness of the alleyway with eyes of suspicion.

"Someone was there, eh."

Milla was looking in the same direction as her master.

".....Oh well, one could only imagine who it was."

As Maria brushed her hair upwards, the sound of the heel of her boots stomping onto the ground could be heard.

"Now—Let's clean these guys up. And we also have to persuade that person to keep quiet, huh."

Though she had beat the living lights out of them due to anger, she also could not leave the eye-witness to that scene alone.

In these times where magic was assumed to be a product of fairy-tales, no one could explain the scene that had happened earlier without it being taken for a joke. But even so, she needed to convince them that it was necessary not to leak it out.

".....If possible, I don't want to make Lyle feel that way anymore."

Gripping the handle of the rifle tightly, Maria stiffened her expression with determination.

### Part 16

*Please escape, someone had told her that.*

*And following those instructions, the girl had ran.*

*The Bloodline of the Fog—their hometown was obfuscated by a barrier of fog, much like their namesake. However, at the present, whirling flames and flying bullets were blowing away the white fog, while black smoke and the stench of blood swept over it like a storm.*

*The castle was crumbling, the forests were burning, and all of it seemed like an illusion.*

*The flames were right behind her. The girl ran away once more.*

*But, it was futile. The flames chased her wherever she went.*

*Disappear—the flames seemed to whisper. Melt. Collapse. It was like a dream, or a mirage. That is your fate. You will all disappear. That is your fate. Accept it. Accept it.....*

*The flames caught up, grasping the girl's feet.*

*Acceptitacceptit. The whispers of the flames chillingly permeated into her, and she screamed out loud.*



### Part 17

"—You're awake."

As Lunaria opened her eyes, she saw that Lyle Waldstein's worried face was looking down at her.

Lunaria who had been lying on the sofa, shifted aside the blanket that covered her as she got up.

The light from the flickering oil lamp led her to assume that the sun had already gone down. It looked like quite a fair amount of time had passed since she lost consciousness.

".....I must apologise, Master Lyle."

Rising up, Lunaria bowed her head.

Her tone did not give off any feel that she was actually sorry. It was merely her normal, robotic reply.

Lifting her head, Lunaria saw that Lyle was looking at her with a troubled face. In his hand was held a handkerchief.

Inclining her head as a gesture before asking a question, she found that drops of liquid had fallen onto the back of her hand. Shaking her head to clear her blurring vision, more drops had fallen.

"....."

Trembling, she reached out towards her eyes with her fingers. The area around her cheeks was dripping wet.

"Are you alright?"

Lyle moved the handkerchief closer in order to wipe her tears.

"Tch!"

In reflex, Lunaria knocked Lyle's hand away. The handkerchief he had held fell towards the ground.

".....Kgh! Don't look at me!"

Reflexively, she emitted the [Fog]. Pushed away by the force of the [Fog], Lyle fell on his butt.

"Don't look..... don't look at me!"

Lunaria shouted, using both arms to hide her face.

She did not need to shed any tears.

There was no reason for her to, either.

So why was—Why was she crying?

The [Fog], as though reflecting Lunaria's inner thoughts, rampaged. Sending the piles of books and documents dancing about in midair, and causing the tables and shelves to rattle unstoppably.

"Calm down!"

Lyle crawled with his head pressed onto the ground, while the space above his head was chaos.

When the [Fog] had finally settled down, the laboratory looked as though a tornado had passed through it.

Pushing scattered books out of his way and standing up, Lyle noticed that Lunaria was cowering on top of the sofa covering her face.

".....Although I do think that looking at a girl's crying face is inexcusable,"

Lyle said, while pushing up his glasses that had slipped out of place.

"Is it really that embarrassing? Anyone who's in your shoes would be crying, right?"

".....I am not crying."

While still hiding her face, Lunaria tried to reply in her usual monotone. However, her voice clearly showed that she was trying to suppress her weeping.

"You're crying, aren't you?"

"I am not."

"No, aren't you crying?"

"I am not. In no way am I crying."

"No no, you're totally crying!"

"I am not crying! If I say I'm not, I'm not!"

She finally snapped.

Lunaria who had accidentally raised her head by reflex, glared stiffly at Lyle.

"...What do you want?"

"Even if you ask me what....."

"If you are planning to rape me then just get it over and done with! If you want to make me into your familiar, then just impose the 'restriction' or 'curse' onto me! What are you waiting for, just do it already!"

"Don't be unreasonable....."

Lyle wrinkled his brows as though having a headache, and then faced Lunaria after straightening his posture.

".....I don't plan on restricting or using you. Nor do I want to make you pay me back."

"Then, why have you saved me?"

"Do you need a reason to help someone in need?"

Lyle tilted his head.

He seemed to truly feel that way from the bottom of his heart, and it was not a facade.

".....I was never in need of any help. Not when I was at the performing troupe, nor when I was abducted."

At Lyle's answer, Lunaria was filled with a sense of despair and sympathy.

There was no need for her to require saving, nor was there a reason for her to cry.

After all, she was as good as a corpse.

She did not have the right to be saved, and there was no worth in doing so.

*—This young man does not understand anything at all.*

Lunaria felt something squirming inside her heart.

".....Did you think that I would be grateful for that?"

She needed to make this misunderstanding youth understand. On his carefree self that did not doubt the goodwill of others, she had to teach despair and wrath.

And so she would deny her accidental tears to this youth.

Lunaria changed her emotionless face into one that was cold, and filled with ill will.

".....If you had saved me out of goodwill, then it was a total waste of effort. I hate people like you. I loathe you. Under the pretense of helping others, you—are but a mere hypocrite."

"I know that."

Lyle nodded his head in agreement.

"It was my self-satisfaction that led me to save you, so that I would feel better about myself. In the first place, doing things 'for the sake of others', or 'acts of mercy', those are but hypocrisies. Because they are hypocrisies, there's no reason to do so."

Though it seemed that he was prone to speaking about his own faults, it did not sound like it was self-mockery. He had stated it so obviously almost like it were one plus one equals two.

Lunaria could not find the words to continue.

And with a serene expression, Lyle looked around the laboratory,

".....I can't sleep in the room with the place like this, so I'll go back to the dorm tonight. You can continue using the sofa. If you don't want to stay here, you're free to leave anytime you want..... but if you don't have a place to go, why not stay here a while longer? At the very least, it'll make my mood better. —Good night, Lunaria."

Saying that, he left the laboratory in silence.

Lunaria was at a loss, as if she had been deserted.

".....What.....? Just what is wrong with that man!?"

Lunaria shouted, giving in to her emotions.

Noticing that anger and frustration had overcome her, Lunaria cast her eyes downward feeling utterly defeated.

".....I'm not crying. There's no need for me to. So, I'm not..... I....."

An existence that ought to disappear. A corpse that continued to move, by some mistake—that was Lunaria D. Nebulablut.

She had no reason to cry, nor any need to. She should have been that sort of existence.

".....If I say I'm not saying, then I'm not....."

It was a whisper, and a barefaced lie.

Till the very end, that youth had not acknowledged that Lunaria was not crying.

He had dodged Lunaria's words smoothly, said his part and left.

".....How vexing....."

Lunaria thought he was being unfair.

It had been totally one-sided..... She bit her lip, thinking that he was a hateful man.

"....."

Lunaria picked up the handkerchief that had fallen near the sofa. And from the moist sensation that she felt from it, she realised that she had been constantly crying.

".....This is the first time that I've let someone see me cry....."

Whispering, Lunaria covered herself up with the blanket in order to be hidden.

As she thought, the blanket had a certain smell to it..... and then she suddenly realised the true identity of that smell.

"The smell of ink....?"

A smell that was oddly suited to both this room, and its owner.

It seemed like she had to stay at that hateful youth's side a little longer, and thus Lunaria begun to sort out the feelings that had her heart in a mess.

## Chapter 3 – The Maiden of Copper

### Part 0

*She was frightened.*

*The girl was feeling fear.*

*There was something that she did not understand, something that she should have understood. Without knowing why, the girl trembled.*

*Feeling fear, horror, and after trembling—the girl finally realised it. That she was a mere lass who knew nothing. A tiny, worthless and insignificant person.*

*That became her pride.*

*And that pride still remained within her heart, even now.*

### Part 1

Upon waking up in the morning, Lyle saw that the shoes he had taken off last night before going to bed had been slightly shifted. Shaking it upside down, a great number of nails and screws spilled out of it.

".....My bad for not falling for it, Hazel."

Facing the empty bed opposite, Lyle sighed and apologised.

Just before he left the dormitory, he borrowed some suitable ingredients from the fridge and wrapped them in cloth. On the way to the laboratory, he thought over and over about what kind of face he should put on.

"Hmm..... It'd be awkward....."

There had been something irresistible about seeing her crying face, but he already understood that girls functioned without logic nor reason, from his experience with Maria.

*The safest option would be to honestly apologise....*

".....She'll keep insisting that she was not crying, huh."

She might have had some serious reason behind her obstinacy, as Lunaria had firmly denied her tears. Probably, her desperate manner might have been due to the same reason.

Whatever the case, she seemed to think that she was 'one without any worth'.

".....I don't like this one bit."

Once, Lyle's master, Erllua Azoth had said that magic was 'simply waiting to disappear'. Indeed, that had been ironic. As his master's face briefly flashed across his mind, Lyle felt a faint sorrow pass over him.

And thus, even when Erllua was instructing him on science, Lyle never stopped his research on magic. There was nothing that did not have worth. Nothing that simply disappears. That was what he had thought.



If he had to come up with a reason for saving Lunaria—it was probably that she had been the exact opposite of Lyle's desires and wishes.

".....Her denying that she was crying is going to do her no good."

Renewing his determination, Lyle trudged towards the laboratory.

Climbing the creaking staircase, leaving the dim corridor, Lyle then inhaled and knocked on the laboratory door.

\*Knock, knock\*—\*Thump, bang!\*

"....."

Almost like that was the sound of books that were carried had been dropped onto the floor in surprise at the knock—that he heard.

"...Excuse me."

Timidly opening the door to his own laboratory, it looked like the dust cloud in the air had been just formed.

To make matters worse, the skirt of the girl who was half-buried by the mountain of books was lifted up, and the revealed underwear was facing right towards Lyle.

"....."

It was an awkward silence.

The slender legs struggled noisily, and dragged out the upper body that was buried in the mountain of books.

"...A good morning to you, Lunaria."

"Good morning, Master Lyle."

Without any lingering trace of her tears last night, Lunaria looked back at Lyle with her usual expressionless face.

"..."

"....."

Lyle closed his mouth thinking of what to say while Lunaria held her gaze steadily.

The awkward silence continued.

".....How lewd."

With that one leaked out whisper, Lyle jumped up with a start.

Turning around in a circle, Lunaria begun to pick up the books that had fallen onto the floor.

".....Erm, Lunaria?"

"What is it, Master Lyle?"

Lunaria replied without even looking back, in her usual monotone.

"....What are you doing?"

"Cleaning up."

Holding an armful of books, Lunaria went to place them on the bookshelves.

"I had knocked them onto the floor. Am I not your assistant, Master Lyle? If so, it is my responsibility to keep this room tidy and neat."

Her pale silver hair swaying, Lunaria went about arranging the books diligently.

However, her movements were strangely awkward, and when she tried to stack up the books,

—\*Thud, thump\*—

"...."

—\*Thud, thump, thud\*—

".....!"

—\*Thud, thump, crash\*.

"Need a hand?"

"No, I am plenty fine on my own."

Lunaria said while feigning total ignorance.

".....Please feel free to go for a stroll while I put things in order. Or perhaps, Master Lyle, are you not satisfied with just a girl's tears, and would go as far as to take pleasure from the sight of her sweating from toil?"



Though what she had said seemed like hypocritical courtesy, her ears had been dyed red.

Frantically stifling his smile, Lyle quickly left the room before he reached his limit.

"Hnngh, heh..... she's the surprisingly clumsy type, eh."

Unexpectedly, her base personality might be that of a contrarian who hates losing. On top of that, she was pretty bad at hiding her emotions even though she wore that expressionless face.

Lyle's mood became pleasant, and placing the wrapped up breakfast in front of the door, he left the laboratory behind.

The academy grounds were still quiet. It was finally a holiday, after all. The boarding students might have stayed out after a night of playing, or were indulging in inactivity even now.

Walking with a destination in mind, he somehow ended up in a rather lively place in the midst of all the quiet. Many students were going in and out of a traditional dance hall.

"Come to think of it, the ball that the student council is organising is tomorrow."

The Vergenheim Academy organised many such refined functions like garden parties and balls, for the numerous high class citizens and sons of nobles.

The ball held on the last day of the Springfire Festival was one of the most popular established traditional event. Before the short holidays, many guys could be seen confessing to girls everywhere in their search for a partner.

Finding a familiar face in the midst of the diligently working students, Lyle raised his hands lightly and approached.

"Good morning, Haz...el....."

".....Morning, Lyle Waldstein."

Looking over with sunken, skeleton-like eyes, Hazel returned with a shadow of a greeting.

".....Are you really Hazel?"

"Who else could you possibly be looking at!"

Hazel threw the carpenter tool he was holding in his hand and shouted.

"You, you... cannot be forgiven....."

Wanting some help, Lyle faced the other students who had noticed the disturbance. However, they too returned the gaze with the same grim look in their eyes as Hazel did.

".....Lyle."

"W-What is it.....?"

"Do you understand who are these people that are making the preparations here?"

"Kindhearted people who are helping the student council..... That's probably not the answer, eh.....?"

"Yeah. The ones here are those without any arrangements with a girl, and are left with no choice but to work their asses off, a bunch of miserable bastards."

The guys whose confessions had been rejected before the holidays, had a shining glint in their bloodshot eyes.

And then Hazel said to the overwhelmed Lyle with an overly tender voice.

"Hey, Lyle? Don't you think that there are only two types of guys in this world?"

".....Let's see. You can't really say that there are only two types, can you.....?"

"No, actually, there are only two major types. Guys who have no luck with women..... and guys who have luck with women."

*Za!*

Hazel and the others stamped their feet simultaneously.

".....Surely you must be different from us, Lyle Waldstein, as one who is burdened with a partner for the ball."

"No, in the first place I completely forgot about the ball—"

"Stop screwing around! Are you telling us that it's nothing to panic about!"

"Kuh, it's not something to feel envious about, is it!"

"Not staying as childhood friends with [The Rose of Fire], whom all guys yearn for, Miss Maria Highline."

"Hiring an adorable assistant, and doing this and that!"

Somehow, the news about Lunaria had spread really fast. This time, he had to try turning the transmission of the rumours into a numerical formula—if he were to survive this safely.

Lyle slowly increased the distance between him and the guys who were thirsting for blood and women.

"Let us carry out the Men's Inquisition!"

Hazel called out to the other guys at his back loudly.

"The accused, Lyle Waldstein, what charges do we have against him!?"

"One of the major crimes would be sexual misconduct!" "Sexual misconduct!Sexual misconduct!"

"Guilty or innocent!?"

"Guilty! Guilty!"

"Then, what sort of punishment does he deserve!"

"If it's larceny, chop off his arms!" "If it's perjury, cut off his tongue!" "If it's sexual misconduct—we have to lop it off!"

"Good!"

Accepting the decision of the jurors, Hazel turned towards Lyle.

"W-Wait! Those are false accusations! A misunderstanding! Give me the chance to defend myself!"

"There's no room for defence or extenuating circumstances. To the Men's Inquisition, there is only judgement."

"Affirmative!Affirmative!"

"What kind of trial is this!"

"Be at ease. We won't really cut it off. That was just an expression of speech."

"I-I see....."

"We'll just disseminate delicate details like its size and length to the entire student body."

"Isn't that just as horrible as piking a decapitated head!"

Hazel and the others were holding tape measures and set squares, even balancing scales. Truly feeling their seriousness, Lyle started breaking out in cold sweat.

He stood on guard against them—waiting for an opportunity to come.

"—This looks pretty interesting."

At the sound of that soft yet powerful voice, all who heard it ceased in motion.

"You're all so lively in the morning. Impressive, impressive."



And at the second time they heard it, everyone's gazes turned at the same time.

That taut, tall figure of the young man was clad in high grade clothing, with everyone's gazes fixed upon him.

Charisma, was it? The presence he gave off was like a sharp, keen sword. Giving off said presence, he carried a strange attraction that drew the attention of others.

"—Greetings, Lyle Waldstein."

Vilhelm Zest turned his smiling face towards Lyle.

And then, he also smiled at the male students who were carrying measuring instruments.

"Would you mind if I borrowed him for a little while? I have some business with him."

"S-Sure....."

As if their maliciousness had been extracted out of them, Hazel and the others nodded.

By simply arriving at the scene, Vilhelm Zest had changed the entire atmosphere.

Vilhelm turned that powerful gaze once again towards Lyle, and closed his eyes partly as if to make Lyle feel at ease.

"And there we have it. Would you mind?"

".....Not at all."

Lyle nodded while maintaining his vigilance, and followed after Vilhelm.

### Part 2

With Vilhelm leading the way, Lyle was brought to a deserted gazebo constructed next to a lotus pond.

Sitting down facing each other at an already prepared table, Vilhelm promptly bowed his head.

"—I must apologise for yesterday. I am partly responsible for the recklessness Gerim and the others have indulged in. I am truly sorry."

"Ah, no....."

Lyle was unnerved by the polar opposites of dignity and meekness that was displayed.

Upon raising his head, Vilhelm smiled as though he was relieved from the bottom of his heart.

"I'm glad that you are not hurt. Yesterday and earlier, both those occasions. It would be our country's loss if you had suffered any harm."

"No way, you exaggerate."

"Such humility, from one who is both a scientist and a mage, «Disciple of the Last Hexe»."

"!"

His body stiffened instantly at that.

If only for a moment. While correcting the position of his glasses, Lyle played innocent.

"What do you mean by—"

"Ah, there's no need to be on guard. I am not taken aback that magi or their like exist. We, the Zest Margrave family are a border chivalric order responsible for guarding the east. Being in that position has granted us many opportunities to patronise engineers and technicians. Excellent warriors,

great architects, builders, and—brilliant mages. During the Dark Ages, we sheltered many a magus, and have even exchanged secret agreements with the Phantasms."

".....I see."

Even though magi and Phantasms have gone into seclusion with their dislike for the state of the world, those who had connections with them would naturally still exist. And amongst them had to be influential people who had sheltered them.

"....And so, Lord Zest."

"You can call me Vilhelm. Or if you like, I don't mind if you call me 'Vil' for short."

Vilhelm corrected him, smiling.

He was unusually friendly.

While trying to imagine what had made him this pleased, Lyle continued the conversation without changing.

".....Lord Zest. I understand that you are well-acquainted with magi. However, the fact is that in modern society, 'magi' are assumed to be nothing more than a superstition. What are you planning to do about me?"

"Calling me Vil would have been fine."

Vilhelm's brows wrinkled. It was an expression that seemed like he was really hurt.

"—What do I plan to do about you, eh? Without beating about the bush, I'd say, 'let us start from being friends', how about that? I did not think of anything like, say, starting an out-dated Inquisition, or trying to destroy the public opinion of you."

"Are you serious? Even though those guys from yesterday, hated me as though I were some eyesore of a bug?"

"That's because they are fools."

The natural-born noble bearing a court rank, scoffed at the youth nobles with a smiling face.

"Do you know what is of the utmost importance to a noble? Power? Wealth? Or is it lineage? They are all wrong. Those who are known as nobles, what they must have, are *eyes that can judge worth*."

Saying that, Vilhelm focused his gaze onto Lyle.

"—A noble is one who manages others. As the times change, if nobles want to remain as nobles, then they have no choice but to continue thus correctly. You have 'worth'. If Gerim and the others failed to see that, then all I can say is that they are incompetent."

".....I doubt that that's the correct judgement. Isn't your judgement being clouded by the nickname of the «Disciple of the Last Hexe»?"

"And again, such humility. Then how would you explain the [Introduction to Steam Calculation] you proposed three years ago?"

"That—"

And this time, Lyle was rendered speechless.

Vilhelm smiled even wider as he had hit the nail on the head.

"As I thought, huh. The automatic machine that moves because of the steam engine—that thesis of yours was truly astounding. It was officially spread with Erllua Azoth's name, but it was something that was based on your ideas, wasn't it?"

".....Why do you know that?"

"The Last Hexe who was never interested in publicity stunts, had proactively publicised that. And as I was wondering why, I thought of this. It would fit together all of the pieces of the puzzle—wasn't it in order to safeguard your talent, as you were still young at that time?"

"....."

Lyle was silent. It was just as Vilhelm said.

"You, who had came up with such a thesis at the age of thirteen, have already exceeded what is known as a genius. Based on that, I will ask you this again—Lyle. Come with me."

Vilhelm held out his hand towards Lyle.

"I want you. Your talents hold massive potential. And to that worth, I hold the utmost respect. Will you let me lend you a hand in accomplishing the things that you want to accomplish?"

Those were the words of the young Margrave who had succeeded his family, filled with a force that fascinated others. Men would bow their heads, while women would be charmed.

The voice of one who manages—or a leader.

Even Lyle felt the sway of wanting to serve this man.

".....It is an honour, but I must refuse."

Lyle said while shaking his head.

Vilhelm let out a small groan with a seemingly surprised expression.

"Hmm..... Why?"

"Because I don't have that kind of worth. At least, that's what I think."

"Humans are unable to accurately judge their own worth. You yourself will not be able to comprehend your own."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah.Because that holds true for me as well."

Vilhelm said, gracefully shrugging his shoulders.

"I too, am unable to understand 'one's own worth'. And that is also one of the things which drives me forward. In order to understand my own worth, I will continue to accept whatever challenges I may face."

"One's own worth....."

"You are the same. What is different, is that I push my own excessive self up, while you are content with yourself—no, you try to be so. Am I wrong?"

"That's not—"

"Not true, is it."

A smile as though he were facing a stubborn child flashed over Vilhelm's face.

"Those are not your true feelings. It's merely natural that you should want to exercise your power."

"That's not—"

"What you fear about your own power is that it might be the only thing Miss Maria requires of you, and you suspect that, am I right?"

"....."

"Heh. Having the things you realised pointed out to you renders you speechless. How cute."

"Please do not make fun of me."

"I'm not making fun of you. Wondering whether the goodwill from the girl you are intimate with is directed towards 'you' or your 'talent'.... that is a rather cute worry. It seems that you can make a decision even right away."

"....."

"Yes, go ahead and display your talent. That talent is also your power. Wouldn't there be nothing to worry about if you just exhibited that power and won her favour? Don't you think that my coming would be a direct

shortcut to that? Establishing your power, and doing so, your relationship with her would be fine. Right?"

"....."

Lyle stared at that outstretched hand as though drawing it in. Instinctively, he raised his hand.

Vilhelm narrowed his eyes, looking pleased.

"—Aren't you being a little too hasty, Lord Vilhelm Zest?"

At the same time as the dignified voice, a hand stretched out from the side and grasped Lyle's wrist tightly.

And then Lyle's field of vision was filled with copper-coloured hair.

".....Maria."

While feeling just the slightest bit of guilt, Lyle called out the name of the girl, his childhood friend.

### Part 3

Maria, who was heading to the academy first thing in the morning, clicked her tongue when she saw that Lyle was neither in his laboratory nor in his dorm room.

Searching the academy grounds, she found the group of people who were making the preparations for the ball at the dance hall.

"A good morrow to all of you. It is rude of me to interrupt you in the middle of your work, but would you mind telling me if you have seen Lyle Waldstein?"

Although Maria did not care much for etiquette and the like when she was young, she seemed to have grasped how to be an elegant Viscount's daughter during these recent years. It had been because she realised its convenience.

Therefore, Maria Highline was the target of the affection of many, regardless of gender. There were only a few nobles that truly scorned the nobles who had bought their nobility.

The men that she had called out to straightened their backs sharply, and smoothly answered Maria's question.

"Thank you, and for your hard work as well. Please keep up the good work!"

Upon her giving them a smile and words of praise, the male students fainted with a seemingly charmed smile on their faces.

Then and there Maria quickly exited the scene. When she was out of public sight, she broke into a run at full speed.

Perhaps it was because her prayers had gotten through, that she immediately found Lyle.

However, the one who was speaking with Lyle was, of all people, Vilhelm Zest.



No sooner than she found him, it seemed she had been just in time to see his face turn into a look of surprise.

Though there were many things she wanted to say, but what she did first was to glare at the man before her eyes.

".....How scary. Being looked at with such an expression would stop my heart, Miss Maria."

"If it stops from a lass' glare, then the Lord Zest of the current generation must really have a delicate heart."

"A lass, eh? They say that even a lioness protecting her young would loosen her guard every alternate night. Aren't you being a little overprotective?"

"Oh? Since you've said that, it does look like you understand what you're trying to do, don't you."

Sharpening the look in her green eyes, Maria then said, as though she were slashing with her words.

"—Please turn back and leave with haste, Margrave Vilhelm Zest. That is, if you do not wish for another mark on your cheek."

"Dear me..... It seems I'm not welcome."

Vilhelm sighed, looking really sad.

That gesture was truly refined, as one would expect from the young noble who could charm women as though it were child's play, but Maria did not loosen her intense glare even for a bit.

The young Margrave—a high rank even among nobility which he had succeeded, was still an illegitimate second son. Though he should have gone through unimaginable hardships, he had adapted himself altogether to the trials and tribulations that were imposed on him.

He was different from those idiots who had gotten their ranks just by opening their mouths. He possessed both an extraordinary spirit that denied

his limits and burning ambition, a person worthy of being respected, even Maria felt thus.

However, that was only initially. After meeting him and exchanging a word or two, her impression had been turned around, and that was when she started swinging her hand.

She did not have a clear and distinct reason for that. In other words, it was a 'woman's intuition'.

She did not like this man. She could never understand a person like him—No, it should be said that *she must never understand him*.

And that thought, did not change even now.

".....Somehow, it looks like it would be best if I took my leave."

Shaking his head, Vilhelm got up.

"Ah—before I forget. Miss Maria, would you care to hand over Gerim Schwatten and the other four that you captured yesterday over to me?"

"...I cannot do that. They had pointed a gun at Lyle, and that makes them fully-fledged criminals. The ones I should be handing them over to are those in charge of administrating justice."

"Of course, it won't be completely unreasonable. I will silence their tongues. Wouldn't that save you the trouble of stopping them from *spinning out some absurd fabrication*?"

"Do you think we would believe the words of a man who might have instigated them in the first place?"

"At the very least, I see Lyle as someone with immense worth. I'd like you to trust me on that."

".....Fine."

With a stiff expression, Maria nodded her head in assent.

The 'worth' that she herself had placed on him told her that it was unlikely that he would double-cross them. Based on that alone, she could trust him.

"I'll send a messenger tonight. That concludes things, I believe, Miss Maria Highline and Lyle Waldstein."

With a smile brimming with confidence, the young Margrave departed.

As the sight of his figure disappeared completely from her line of sight, Maria finally let out a slow breath of relief.

".....When they say someone can't be dealt with with ordinary means, they must refer to someone like him."

"Maria....."

Upon him calling out to her, Maria sternly glared at Lyle.

".....What were you *thinking*?"

"Sorry?"

"Were you thinking of joining forces with someone like him?"

Without minding the fact that Lyle was cringing, Maria narrowed her eyes.

"Leaving me, whom you've had an inseparable relationship with for over ten years, for that kind of guy?"

"Ma-Maria, calm down...."

"Calm down? I am already calm enough!"

Contrary to her words, Maria raised her voice.

Maria thought it was mortifying.

As she feared, she only meant *that much* to Lyle.

".....I am no longer the girl who only ever got lost, y'know? I'm begging you, at least discuss things with me first. At least share with me your worries....."

Involuntarily, her voice had dropped down to a softer tone, and Maria cast her eyes downwards. It was rare, for the girl who was always trying her best in front of Lyle.

To Maria, Lyle Waldstein was a very important person. He was a youth who was said to be a memento of her family's benefactor, her trusted childhood friend, and more than anything, the '*benefactor of her soul*'.

That was why the fact that Lyle did not rely on her, vexed her this much.

"Ma-Maria.....!"

At the depressed state of Maria which he had practically never seen before, Lyle went into a panic.

"I-I'm sorry! I didn't consult you because I was in a miserable state, and I didn't want to show you how awful I was! It doesn't mean that I was ignoring you or anything! I'm sorry! Really sorry! I apologise! I'm sorry, Maria!"

—Eh?

Maria was surprised that her childhood friend was desperately apologising.

Lyle was someone who always brushed off her advances. It was unusual that he would proactively be concerned for her.

*Should I.....?*

Inside the depressed Maria, hope and expectation were starting to well up.

It was also convenient that she had not let go of his hand. Like a spoiled child, Maria brought Lyle's arm to her body.

".....Are you really sorry?"

"Y-Yeah....."

Lyle nodded, his face gradually reddening due to the softness of the chest that was pushing against him.

Sticking her body close to him, Maria's face was blushing bright red. If he were not at least embarrassed himself, she would definitely not be able to face him.

".....If so, will you be my partner for the ball tomorrow?"

"S-Sure..... wait, what?"

Lyle blinked. Recovering his composure, he eyed Maria with a suspicious look in his eyes.

".....Were those crocodile tears?"

"Hmm? I have no idea what you're talking about, y'know?"

Treating it like a contest, Maria rubbed her chest against him hard. He was fearful that his heart would burst any moment with how fast it was beating, as her expression was full of a woman's sensuality, her eyes looking at him suggestively.

"You said 'sure' and agreed, didn't you? Since you've already said so, you'll keep your word, won't you?"

".....I understand. I'll promise you, Maria."

Lyle nodded, having seemingly given up.

Crying out inside with joy, Maria hugged Lyle by the neck with all her strength.

"Thank you so much, Lyle!"

"Whoa whoa! Maria— !"

Being hugged this suddenly, Lyle lost his balance.

Overwhelmed by Maria's vigour, Lyle fell down brilliantly.

"Gueh!"

"Lyle!?"

Groaning with a voice like that of a squashed frog, Lyle had naturally fainted.

### Part 4

It was Lunaria Nebulablut's first time doing something like cleaning. Being the first to be born to those of the Bloodline of the Fog (the Nebulablut) in roughly a century, she was brought up by her brethren like a princess.

Hence, it was natural that she would be poor at it. That was how Lunaria made an excuse for not making any progress at all. Afterwards, she had been rather surprised at herself when she thought back about it.

Speaking of surprised, those humans who had quite some years on them—all of them who had the occupation of a 'professor'—had come to visit Lyle.

"May I ask who might you be?"

After they had gotten over their surprise after hearing her answer that she was the newly hired assistant, they had said, 'I see, he's finally got around to it..... but he sure did hire a cute young lady. My assistant is a naggy old hag instead'. After complaining, they passed Lunaria some documents and left.

Closely packed numbers and symbols were written on those documents. They looked like they had wanted to pass these documents over to Lyle. It seemed as if that youth could decipher these codes that could even be a match for the language of faeries and spirits.

Over the day, the laboratory was returned to its original disorderly messy state, and then the owner of the room returned.

"—Lend me the sofa."

Maria Highline who had turned up and promptly left earlier, said that while pointing at Lyle who had fainted for some reason.

"...Did something happen?"

"W-Who knows...?"

Upon Lunaria's enquiry, Maria left the room while whistling.

*Was that whistling some sort of prayer or something? I still don't quite understand the traditions of humans.*

Swiftly returning, Maria had a wash basin filled with water in her hands. Moving the side of Lyle who was lying on the sofa, she soaked a handkerchief and applied it to the back of his head.

Although Maria looked embarrassed, the movements of her nursing Lyle were filled with affection. Bringing a chair over to the sofa, she smiled while gazing at Lyle who was lying there, sleeping. And at times, she reached out to stroke his forelocks.

".....Lady Maria."

"Maria."

While waving her finger, Maria corrected.

".....Honorifics like 'Lady' are used for formal situations."

".....Then, Maria, have you known Lyle for a long time?"

"Hmm... it's already been nine years, seven months and eighteen days since I've known him, I think."

Maria said in specific detail.

Her meeting with Lyle had been so astounding, to the extent that she could still clearly remember the day they met.

".....The first time I met him, was at a villa in the countryside."

Although there was no way she could have read Lunaria's inner thoughts, Maria had started to say while giggling, with a nostalgic expression.

"My mother had a weak constitution, and in order for her to recuperate, I accompanied her to the countryside. And in that countryside, lived the Highline family's benefactor, Madam Erllua Azoth."

"Erllua Azoth....."



"She was Lyle's master, and also a foster mother to him. When Madam Erllua had paid us a visit at the villa, she had brought with her Lyle, whom she had just taken custody of. He was so skinny and frail, that my first impression of him was that he was a 'weak, gangly kid'."

'Even though he hasn't changed that much', added Maria, looking down at his sleeping face.

"Because of that, I made Lyle into my sidekick and dragged him around. 'I'll train you hard!', I said at that time. Thinking back.... it was amazing that he didn't hate me for it."

The side profile of the wryly smiling Maria, could not be mistaken as anything other than an expression of a 'maiden in love'.

"Ever since then—Um, you have liked him ever since then, right?"

She started to stutter halfway through her question.

Lunaria who had absolute nil experience regarding the matters of love was engaging in a discussion on it for the first time.

Maria responded with a groan and frown to Lunaria's enquiry.

"You wanna know?"

"No..... no, I would like to know. Master Lyle is my employer, after all."

"Hm..... well, the closest thing to describe him with would be a 'cowardly disciple'. At that time, I was a dreamer, so I said things like 'you have to be a stronger man than me' to him."

"So.... why did you do that?"

"That's a secret."

Cutting it off with a dignified voice, Maria stood up firmly.

"—In just one day, you've had a lot of changes in expression, haven't you. Till yesterday, you didn't even have the will to die."

After being told that, Lunaria was doubtful of its veracity.

"Did Lyle say something to you? No—rather, he said nothing to you, right?"

Maria had a strained smile.

"I'll be heading back. I've something on tomorrow night, so there are some preparations I need to do. I'll leave things to you."

Waving her hand, Maria started to leave the room.

Lunaria, without thinking,

"—Uhm."

"What is it?"

".....Are you fine with this? If he is with someone like me..... Do you not find it unpleasant...?"

Even Lunaria herself did not quite understand why she had asked a question like that.

"Yes, it's unpleasant alright. So much so that I want to pluck out my heart."

Hearing that answer, Lunaria felt a chill in her heart. Previously she had felt that it was closer to dislike, but that chilling feeling that she thought had faded away—was actually the feeling of loss.

Could it be, that she had not wanted to lose anything anymore?

She who had nothing to lose, she who simply wanted to fade away, was she truly thinking that?

But—what was it exactly?

"It's unpleasant, but I don't mind. I will win Lyle over through my own charm. I won't let something like having one or two more people stop me."

At Maria's words, Lunaria who had unconsciously cast her gaze downwards raised her head.

The girl with the copper hair suddenly relaxed her frowning expression, and shrugged her shoulders.

"—Lyle would neither permit it, surely. After all, he's a very prideful and softhearted person who'll insist that it's for self-satisfaction, even if he gets hurt, and even if it's hypocrisy."

A very prideful and softhearted person.

Although she was expressing her feelings about that youth, she had a rather calm expression.

"And so, do as you like. Because that's what I'm going to do."

Saying just that, with her copper hair swinging around, Maria departed.

Dumbfounded, Lunaria could only stare at the door which Maria had left through.

She was a really impressive girl.

For some reason, Lunaria thought that she herself was miserable. Both reason and worth for harbouring thoughts of shame, just a little more and they would have meant nothing to her.

And what was it that had made that girl seemed so dazzling?

Was there a reason for her proudly saying that it was a 'secret'?

".....If I get to know that 'secret', would I too understand you?"

Lunaria whispered while looking down at Lyle.

He who made a mess out of other's hearts, the fainted Lyle was a somewhat carefree person.

".....He is truly a hateful man."

### Part 5

Gerim Schwatten and his other four cronies were released deep in the night. As the coachman who was the messenger dispatched by Margrave Zest started the horse carriage, they leaked out a sigh of relief at their regained freedom.

However, noticing that the horse carriage was heading to the outskirts, one of the youths called out to the coachman.

"Oi, where are we going?"

"....."

The coachman did not respond. Though they scolded him for his disrespect, the human-like figure remained silent.

Where the horse carriage was stopped, it was in the middle of a field in the outskirts of the royal capital. The sky was covered by thick clouds, and it was impossible to accurately determine their exact location.

With the weird coachman leading the way with a lamp, they finally reached a *pit* that suddenly opened up in the ground. In the middle of the field covered with grass, was a part that was paved with concrete artificially.

The coachman descended down the staircase that continued into the bottom of the pit. The youths reluctantly followed.

.....For how long did they descend downwards?

They finally arrived at what looked like an immensely wide space. The only source of light that was the coachman's lamp was nowhere enough to dispel the thick darkness.

However, it was enough to illuminate the faces of people there.

"Lord Vilhelm...!"

The young Margrave, with his sword as a cane, had been waiting for them.

Almost falling over, the youths ran forward, bowing their heads toward Vilhelm.

"P-Please forgive us, Lord Vilhelm... for our terribly disgraceful behaviour....."

"However, we have good news! That Lyle Waldstein is a user of suspicious magic!"

"He had even kept a fiendish devil wearing the form of a girl as a pet! We need to call for an Inquisition immediately!"

Vilhelm listened to them motionlessly. No, he only looked as if he were.

Before long, they had ran out of things to say, and Vilhelm, without turning towards anyone,

".....Hah."

Leaked out a tiny sigh.

".....How could you even mention something like an Inquisition in this time and age? Have you forgotten the history of the Kingdom of Ilsestein? For those words to come from the descendants of nobles who had fought against the despotism of the Church.....was that meant to be a joke?"

—Was anyone from the group of youths able to notice that subtle change?

That Vilhelm Zest had made a decisive judgement.

".....I realise my folly."

"Lord Vilhelm....?"

"And on top of that..... I made a promise to make them keep quiet, huh."

Saying that, Vilhelm drew his sword without any enthusiasm. The sword was brandished as though it were a reward, and as natural as if it were merely a shrug of the shoulders. The youths inhaled their breaths at its sight.

A flash, two flashes—there were four strikes in total.

As though it were a prearranged act, four of the youths collapsed simultaneously.

The coachman carrying the lamp, as though having seen nothing, did not move at all.

"Hi, hii!"

The only one remaining was Gerim, who was wondering what had brought this upon him. The power had drained out of him, and he scrambled about on the ground in fear in an unsightly manner.

"Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!"

"—There's no particular meaning behind this. It was pure chance that my sword had been swung in this order."

Vilhelm said with a composed tone to Gerim whose voice had been rendered incoherent.

"I must express my gratitude. Thanks to all of you, I have been able to grasp the general idea of the power belonging to the major nobles, and also how they use their assets. I'll be able to do as I please, from now on."

Gerim's face paled.

Taking control of influential nobles. That was what Vilhelm had said.

"Y-You deceived us....."

"That's ridiculous. If you had been more capable, we could have been on friendlier terms. However, no matter which way you consider it, I'm far better than you. What you should hate is your own limit, GerimSchwatten."

That had been nothing more than the product of aristocratic spirit.

Whether they had any use to him or not—this man had almost committed the merciless one-sided slaughter once done by nobles of the past to the commoners.

Right before the eyes of Gerim who was deemed useless, the sharp point of the sword was thrust at him.

Elegant it was, but the long sword also gave off an ominous feeling. The blade gave off a faint reddish sheen, looking as though it would drip blood at any moment. Although the craftsmanship was exquisite, what attracted the most attention was the mysterious shining gem on the hilt. The dusk-coloured gem—more commonly used as fuel nowadays, but since time immemorial it had been known as the mysterious magical stone—amber. As though glaring, it glowed with a glittering light.

"W-Wait! Please wait! Anything—I'll do anything!"

".....Ha."

With a small sigh, the blade sliced through the air.

### Part 6

On the last day of the Springfire Festival, the masquerade ball planned by the academy's student council on the last day of the holidays begun without a hitch.

As the sky darkened, people in all sorts of fantastic get-ups started to appear from every corner of Vergenheim Academy. There were girls wearing kimonos that came from the Oriental East and guys geared in full metal armour. There were also those who had put on skull-shaped masks imitating the Grim Reaper or the classic white mask of a jester.

Looking at the students in different elaborate outfits in the dance hall of the academy, Lyle felt dizzy.

Lyle himself was dressed in a normal suit with an owl mask that covered the top half of his face. Although, in the midst of people wearing tiger or lion pelts, that could be considered rather mild. Besides his mask, he was as normal as it got.

Idling away at a corner of the hall, he was abruptly clapped on his shoulder. Looking at the person who had nonchalantly done so—Lyle groaned.

"It's you, Lyle, isn't it? It's me, your pal."

The grotesque zombie before him with arrows sticking out of his head, complete with fake eyeballs popping out—the person dressed up like a zombie before him, called out to Lyle with a familiar attitude.

"...Are you Hazel?"

"Spot on."

With energy unlike that of a zombie's, Hazel puffed out his chest, proud of his costume.

"So, whaddya think about this costume?"

"...It's pretty good."



"Yeah! The troupe I was working with as a part-time job dressed me up with their stage props. Just what you'd expect from true professionals. Did it scare you?"

"Yep. It sure did."

"With a get-up as awesome as this, I'm gonna stand out more than any of those bastards out there. The ladies are gonna go gaga at me."

Although Hazel seemed pretty excited, Lyle simply nodded his head in silence.

"But, how did you know it was me?"

"'Cause you were just standing there without looking like you had any interest in the ladies. Look, the impatient ones are already starting."

While some people were making small talk, they could also see others that were whispering into their partner's ears. In masquerade balls, guessing the names of the other party-goers was but one of the games. It also provided a good opportunity for people to make romantic confessions, with lines like, 'I finally found you'. Although there were also rumours that lovers who took part in the ball together would end up breaking up if they could not find their partner.

"They're really desperate, aren't they? Especially those guys who couldn't get a girlfriend, but it's not like they can do much about it. Well, someone who's got it real good like you wouldn't care about them, would you..."

"I'm begging you, don't put that face so close to me..."

Just as Lyle winced due to Hazel's visage of death drawing near him, a stir of wonder began to spread throughout the hall. Following where the masked guests were looking at, they found themselves shifting their attention towards the entrance.

The Goddess of Fire—the collective attentions of the party-goers were concentrated upon the woman so gorgeously dressed.

A deep crimson dress that adorned her slender body. Her back and shoulders were daringly exposed, yet it gave off the impression of sheer grace and beauty. Wrapped around her chest area were many layers of thin cloth that resembled a plumage.

She wore a glamorous mask crafted of scarlet-dyed feathers. Even from just her red lips and fine jaw, they could tell that she was beautiful. And combined with her copper hair, her outfit was truly magnificent, as though she were a phoenix.

"Absolutely gorgeous and filled with glamour, yet there's not even a single bit of gaudiness."

Hearing Hazel's thoughts, the charmed Lyle came to his senses. While rebuking himself for having lost his composure, he approached the [Goddess of Fire] who had been encircled by people.

"...As promised, I have come to be your escort, Lady Maria Highline."

"Thank you, and let us enjoy the evening , Sir Lyle Waldstein."

Curtseying with perfect etiquette, Maria who was dressed up as the Goddess of Fire then reached out with her hand, placing it on top of Lyle's.

"Sigh~ I knew it, it's Lady Maria."

Startled by the approaching zombie, Maria reflexively threw out her fist.

"Gah!"

"Maria! That's Hazel! He's Hazel!"

"Oh. Oops. He was a little too disgusting, so I....."

"U-uu... that hurt....."

Hazel who had been struck right in the liver, rose up tottering as though he was about to die.

Looking at the overly eerie face of Hazel, Lyle and Maria then exchanged glances with each other, and turned around to face the commotion that was rising up once more.

"Whoa! Look at that!"

Hazel who had seen the source of the commotion, departed as though he were a fresh new zombie.

The one who had caught the attention of the party-goers, this time, was a slim, slender girl in a black dress. The dress was elaborately cut, though it had a simple design, which emphasised just how ephemeral the girl was. Her mask was black like her entire outfit, which further highlighted the clarity of her pale silver hair.

The Princess of Moonlight—that might have been the best way to describe her.

Her ephemeral atmosphere stimulated the guys' protective instincts, and hence a lot of male students approached her asking to be her escort. And amongst them was a certain zombie (Hazel), shoving his way through till he reached her. With exaggerated gestures, Hazel made a speech, but the girl lightly brushed him off with one or two word answers, and he fell prostrate onto the floor of the hall.

".....I feel sorry for him."

Just as everybody's attention were focused on the creepy 'body' that was more realistic than the real thing itself, the [Princess of Moonlight] slipped out of the crowd of people. Coming over and stopping before Lyle, who had watched the entire thing from start to end, she made a curtsey.

".....He really invited you, didn't he."

Pouting her lips, Maria then turned and faced the [Princess of Moonlight]—Lunaria.

"A good evening to you, Lady Maria. —As tonight calls for formality."

"Uh-huh. Good evening to you too, Lunaria."

"Thank you... and a good evening to you too, Master Lyle."

"You too, Lunaria."

Though he was a little concerned with Maria who was trying to hint at something and Lunaria's appearance, Lyle pointed at the 'corpse' being carried away and said,

"...What did you say to him?"

"I refused Sir *Hansel*, telling him that, 'Master Lyle keeps me busy all night, and thus I cannot lend anyone my body.'"

Although it was true that she was up busy cleaning even at night, her words were nonetheless misleading for someone still going through his teenage puberty.

For a few seconds, Lyle made a silent prayer in his heart for Hazel, whose name had not even been remembered.

"More importantly—is there something that is making us the centre of attention...?"

Lyle surveyed the surroundings, after hearing Lunaria's words.

The many students within the grandiose hall were focusing their attention at Lyle—rather, at the [Goddess of Fire] and [Princess of Moonlight] who were waiting upon him.

Both Maria and Lunaria were exceptionally beautiful girls who gave off different impressions. Their masquerade tonight only served to further enhance those impressions others had of them. It was not surprising that they were in the spotlight.

"Still, it looks like there are some pretty scary looks mixed in there."

Stifling her smile, Maria took Lyle's right arm.

Those scary looks—namely, the looks coming from the guys, intensified. Lyle could feel the intensity of the stares of those who were gritting their teeth in

jealousy both in his heart and on his neck. The bloodthirst focused upon his vital points were rather unnerving.

"Master Lyle, your hand."

Saying that, Lunaria entwined her arm with his, on Maria's opposite side.

From somewhere, he could feel the voices cursing him, going, '...Ain't he one hell of a bastard no matter how you look at it?', 'I'll kick his ass later'.

"L-Lunaria? I'd really appreciate it if you would let go of me..."

"It would not do for me to be separated from my master."

Hearing Lunaria say that, the grinding of teeth could be heard.

(...Is she doing this on purpose?)

Looking at Lunaria, Lyle thought that even if she wore a mask, there really was no difference given her usual expressionless face.

"Isn't having a lady on each arm a man's dream, Lyle?"

Maria who was on his right could not hide the teasing smile worn on her lips, and pressed herself closer to him, as though emphasising her cleavage.

Instantly, the ripping sounds of handkerchieves that were being gnawed upon resounded from all over the hall.

(.....They sure have put me in a tight spot.....)

Lyle's childhood friend whose purpose in life seemed to be teasing him endlessly was indeed a massive headache-inducing existence for him.

Having these troublesome girls on each arm, Lyle was dragged to the middle of the hall. With each step he took, the killing intent that he felt increased even more.

—If he were to get killed in the near future, they would not have a shortage of suspects, for sure.

Just as Lyle was despairing over his future, a waiter called out to them with an "Excuse me."

"I have a message here for you, Milady."

With that, he handed an envelope to Maria. She then opened the envelope and took out the letter inside, with a suspicious look on her face.

".....Hmm. Sorry about this, but excuse me for a while, Lyle. Something just came up."

Shrugging her shoulders, Maria reluctantly let go of Lyle's arm.

"Got it? Until I get back, don't make a fool out of yourself!"

Emphasising her words by pointing at him, Maria then followed behind the waiter.

Lyle who had been left there, felt the slight lessening of killing intent, and heaved a sigh of relief instinctively.

"...Oh well, let's enjoy ourselves, shall we?"

"Yes, Master Lyle."

With that, Lunaria pressed herself onto him.

The feeling of her body he felt on his arm was surprisingly delicate, and that made the softness of her slight chest a little more prominent.

Though Lyle tried to break free, she grabbed on with even greater strength that he did not expect from such a slender arm, and gave up trying to.

Immediately following that, the hall was filled with dance music. Beneath the crystal chandelier, men and women in all sorts of eccentric get-ups began to dance a waltz, with steps that had grace unlike their costumes.

"Are you going to dance as well, Master Lyle?"

"I'm afraid not..."

He did learn a bit of dancing before, but his teacher had told and emphasised specifically to him, 'Got it? Lyle, you can't dance with anyone else besides me, understand? Definitely not!' There was no doubt that he must have been a really bad dancer.

"What about you, Lunaria? You seem like you'd be good at it."

"...I have been taught how to dance, but I was never skilled at it."

He was a little relieved that he was not alone in that, and with that, they found themselves with nothing to do.

As they were wondering what to do next, their heads tilted in contemplation, the music ended, those that were dancing dispersed, and a new group of people stepped onto the middle of the hall. The orchestra started to set up, and the conductor was stretching his shoulders.

"...That reminds me."

An idea suddenly struck him. Grasping Lunaria's hand, Lyle brought her to the orchestra.

The orchestra was formed from the students from the music club. Lyle bowed his head to the student conductor.

"Excuse me, but this lady here would like to sing a song. Would you be so kind as to let her have the floor?"

Even though she had her mask on, it was evident that she was completely shocked.

Throwing Lunaria a fleeting glance, the conductor nodded his head lightly, and let them have the conductor's stage.

"Well, if you please."

"But....."

"You may not be that good at dancing, but singing is your forte, right? Just give it a shot."

".....As you wish, Master Lyle."

Lunaria whispered as though in surrender, got up onto the conductor's stage and bowed her head to the orchestra. After a discussion with the leader of the orchestra, they decided on a rather antiquated piece of music.

Couples who had found each other were gathering in the middle of the hall. At the sound of the leading violin, the music started.

Lunaria synchronised herself with the rhythm, and—

"—*Ahhh*—"

The moment she started her song, everybody froze in place, and turned their heads to the source of the song and the music which accompanied it. The members of the orchestra who had been in blank amazement stopped their playing of the instruments, but quickly resumed in a panic. The conductor beside Lyle was completely caught off-guard by Lunaria's singing voice, and could not take his eyes off her.

(.....Once again, I'm reminded of how truly beautiful her voice is.)

There were many legends of Phantasms that related to their 'singing voice'. Lunaria's song was fitting for a «Nosferatu», those who were the children of the night, giving off the feeling of a clear night sky with a silent moon.

When her song ended, the students who were dancing broke into hearty applause at the songstress who had suddenly took the stage.

Although Lunaria had stiffened up on the conducting stage, before long, she made a small bow and stepped down.

"Good work there."

".....It's the first time that I have gotten such an applause."

Mumbling in a small voice, Lunaria tugged on Lyle's sleeve.

"Lunaria, you sing really well."



".....I must confess that I do not have much of a liking for dancing... and that I practiced singing for the purpose of covering that up....."

Lyle could not see her expression underneath her mask, but somehow it appeared that she was rather pleased, and so he was relieved.

"—Erm, excuse me."

The voice of the student conductor reached their ears. It seemed like they wanted an encore because of her popularity.

"...Master Lyle?"

"Yeah. It's alright, go ahead."

"...Please excuse me then. Thank you very much."

Bowing her head, Lunaria went off to join the orchestra members in a half-run.

With that, she would be able to enjoy herself despite her inability to dance, which Lyle was thankful for.

The melody of a moonlit night begun once more. And so, Lyle closed his eyes and enjoyed it.

### Part 7

Maria ascended to the second storey of the hall.

Looking down from the atrium, the masquerade ball of fantastic outfits seemed almost like a zoo.

Maria was led to one of the private spaces that had been partitioned off by curtains, and she frowned behind her mask.

"Greetings, Miss Maria."

The one who welcomed Maria was the young Margrave, Vilhelm Zest. The militaristic uniform he wore suited him well, but for some reason he was not wearing a mask, even though it was a masquerade ball.

Holding back a sigh, Maria curtseyed before him.

"It is my honour to be invited, Lord Zest. I understand why is it you have called for me."

"There's no way I could mistake another woman for you—saying that out loud does sound rather impressive, hm. By the way, would you care to bring me to a boutique and give me a few pointers on how to pick a mask and an outfit?"

Maria could not hide the indignation on her face at how rudely she was invited, and Vilhelm raised his hands in surrender.

"I apologise for my rudeness. Won't you let me make it up to you over some tea?"

Of course, she could have forcibly left, but it seemed like doing that would bring a fair amount of trouble later on.

Maria took a seat violently. She did not even so much as take a glance at the food that had been prepared.

"Do you not like the tea that had been prepared?"

"Not at all. I do enjoy tea, but I like them best when you have some milk to go with it."

Blocking out the mellow fragrance of the tea from her mind, Maria then asked Vilhelm.

"And so? You came to a masquerade ball without a mask, care to share why?"

"Straight to the point, aren't you. You truly cherish your time together with Lyle, do you not?"

"If you understand, then let's get this over and done with, shall we? If you're going to keep up that annoying attitude, your face is going to turn red again, y'know?"

"Very well, I'll stop beating about the bush. —Maria Highline. Will you lend me your strength?"

"You would want the help of such a little lass?"

"Modesty—it is not, but deception. You already possess great influence in numerous businesses. Though you are their only daughter, your existence is something that the Highline Foundation cannot simply ignore."

".....Huh, I wonder about that."

As Vilhelm had said, Maria already had control over many of her family's businesses. It was not a mere one or two businesses that she had started up on her own. However, Maria was only pretending to have no actual power, as it would be easier for her to take action that way.

—And that fact, had been readily discovered by him.

Maria nonchalantly adjusted her sitting posture.

"—Margrave Vilhelm Zest. What do you wish for? What is it you wish for that you would seek power?"

"My wish is merely something that anyone would have. 'To increase one's own worth', it is simply that."

"'One's own worth'?"

"In a man's life, what he would desire for is surely that. Doing good deeds, amassing wealth, wanting a partner, desiring status, leaving behind descendants, all of that is done so one could affirm their own worth—isn't that so?"

"It's not like I don't understand."

'Worth' was, namely, the recognition of others. And because people wanted recognition, it was natural that they would want others to see them in a better light.

There existed none who were worthless. If there were, that was *only because they had not found any worth in themselves*.

"What will become of a person's worth, what have they accomplished before? What I want, is just to fully utilise the worth of others. Something which is connected to that of my own. So, how about it? Will you allow me to increase your worth?"

".....After all that I've done, eh."

Maria wore a thin smile on her face. It was a smile of rejection.

"I'm quite satisfied with myself, at the moment. I do not wish for anything more than that."

"Stop deceiving yourself. You're not satisfied."

"And what do you base that assumption on?"

"<Erbe Der Last Hexe>."

Maria was shocked.

"The rumour spread around at the same time as the disappearance of «The Last Hexe», Erllua Azoth. Though it is an urban legend, it does indeed exist. Be it a theory, or a magic formula, it is a manifestation of power. Miss Maria, you should have some idea of what it is. The Highline family had a deep relationship with that «Witch», after all."

"...That's your reason, huh."

Maria quietly comprehended what she had been told.

The reason why Vilhelm Zest, the young Margrave had approached her—

"—Is it for the sake of getting Lyle on your side?"

"Indeed. If there was someone who could obtain that , it would have to be the one and only person that Erllua Azoth had ever mentored, the «Disciple of the Last Hexe»—Lyle Waldstein."

Vilhelm's smile widened, and he extended his hand.

"I know something of the <Erbe>. And if I show him that, even he would feel compelled to join my cause. After all, your dissatisfaction is overridden by your vexation towards him. So, lend me your strength. If you agree, I will give you what you wish for—*a Lyle Waldstein who will change the world.*"

That invitation was the temptation of the devil. Probing for the hidden dissatisfactions of humans, appraising the worth of their souls, whispering in their ear, tempting them.

Maria stared motionlessly at the outstretched palm.

If she reached out and took that hand, her desire could very well be fulfilled. Her dream could very well come true. That was a hand which encompassed power, and made her believe in it.

"—Ggh, ggh..... AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

As Vilhelm frowned with a doubtful look, Maria did not seem particularly concerned. Her body trembling and jolting, she continued her uproarious laughter.

"Heheh..... Seriously, haha, you're such a funny chap, Vilhelm Zest!"

".....What is so amusing?"

"I finally got it. Why I've always thought that, 'I must not understand him'."

Maria stood up with enough force to knock over the chair.

"Well, I must say that although I think things would be pretty fun if I were to make use of you, my goal is not to get *Lyle on my side*. *It is to put him on the right track*."

"So... what is the difference?"

"If you do not understand—"

Maria narrowed her eyes in pity.

"Then you'll spend the rest of your life being unable to understand what resides within a *woman's heart*, Margrave Vilhelm Zest."

".....Hrmph."

After Maria had finished saying her piece, Vilhelm made a small sigh.

".....And here I thought you were someone whom I could see eye to eye with. You have the drive to achieve greatness, and the determination to support that drive... however, that is the very thing that restricts you..... hah."

Leaking out a sigh again, Vilhelm wiped his face of expression—and snapped his fingers.

The partitioning curtains were pushed apart, and many masked men showed up.

Maria snorted.

She knew who they were, even though they had their masks on. They were the noble youths she had beaten up the other day.

"—Is this a breach of our agreement?"

"I'm not laying a hand on Lyle, am I?"

Vilhelm declared nonchalantly.

The masked noble youths approached Maria, who was shrugging her bare shoulders, without hesitation.

".....Wait, hold it right there."

Saying that, Maria removed her mask. Her dolled-up, vivacious and beautiful face was revealed. She was glamorous—and with a flirtatious smile on her face, the young men who were about to seize her were stopped in their tracks.

"After all the effort I put in..... I'll at least let you all have a little look."

Placing her mask on the table, Maria suddenly placed her right leg on her chair. Her scarlet high heels, slender ankle and the black stockings worn over her supple calf were exposed.

Someone's gulp could be heard.

Maria's smile widened, and she pinched the corners of her skirt around her knees, slowly lifting it up.

Smoothly, from her knees, to her thighs overflowing with sex appeal—no man would be able to take their eyes away from the healthy colour of her beautiful legs being revealed in such a sensual manner.

Maria nodded, seemingly satisfied at their excited reaction,

"—Enjoy yourselves on *this*, alright?"

With that, Maria pulled her skirt up to a *comfortable position* and then, she drew out a Derringer that had been inserted into her garter belt.

And at the youths who had suddenly found themselves staring into the muzzle of the gun, Maria mercilessly pulled the trigger.

Along with the quiet gunshot, the bullet that was fired hit the leg of one of the youths.

"—GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

An instant later, he screamed in a voice far louder than the gunshot.

"You got to see something good, didn't you! That was but the reward!"

Treating the collapsed man as a cushion, Maria leapt right into them. Revealing the splendid contours of her legs, she delivered kicks, and in a flash she had floored two of them.

The remaining two then silently drew closer. Maria dodged with nimble steps, and abruptly, she struck them across the back of their heads with the handgrip of her Derringer.

In the twinkling of an eye, the five youths were lying on the floor of the terrace.

Even though there had been a gunshot and that loud scream, the atmosphere of the ball had not been disrupted.

Due to the performance of the orchestra and the various assorted acts on the lower floor of the hall, people had not noticed the commotion on the second floor terrace.

".....Hrmph. I did not expect much out of them, but the results are nevertheless disappointing."

Murmuring in a low voice, Vilhelm stood up from his seat. Before anyone had noticed it, he had already drawn his sword.

"So, you're next?"

Maria turned her gun towards him. She had only one shot left.





"Ah, do not be hasty. I have something to do before that."

Vilhelm then turned towards the youths who were groaning after being kicked. Having had his mask knocked out of place, Gerim Schwatten's face was revealed, he who had taken part in surrounding her earlier.

".....Turns out you weren't useful at all, Gerim."

"P-Please forgive me..."

"I forgave you the first time. But there won't be a second time."

Off-handedly, Vilhelm slashed his blade across the nape of Gerim's neck.

Maria's eyes widened in surprise, but in reality it was a shallow cut, and not a fatal wound.

Rather, the shocking thing was what came after.

The blood on Vilhelm's sword disappeared. It was almost like the blade had drank the blood.

At the same time, Gerim, who had suffered the cut, began to quiver with a jerk. The light faded from his eyes, and so did his frightened expression. And then, he rose to his feet, as though he did not have a gunshot wound on his leg.

"...What is this?"

The youths whom she thought had been knocked out got to their feet. Their masks were dislodged, revealing eyes that were also void of the light of consciousness.

"Now, get her."

At Vilhelm's order, the youths rushed forward at Maria.

"Kgh!"

They advanced, without any care for the muzzle pointed at them. Reluctantly, she fired yet another shot into a leg, but that did nothing to halt their advance.

"Damn it!"

Although it would have been easy to get away due to their amateurish movements, she was overawed by the bizarreness of it all.

"If there's only five of them, I can completely take control of all their minds. They no longer feel pain nor fear. Do me a favour and give yourself up, will you?"

Vilhelm said to Maria.

He had been manipulating those who had admired him as though they were puppets, yet his voice did not even have a single trace of guilt.

"Y-You vile— !"

Cursing, Maria changed her course of action.

What sort of trick it was she did not know, but she was certain Vilhelm was manipulating them. All she knew was that she had to do something about the puppeteer.

Maria leapt over the head of the youth who came at her, and from the hem of her skirt that billowed in the air, she pulled out yet another Derringer.

Without mercy, she fired two shots at Vilhelm one after another.

".....You're kidding me, aren't you.....?"

Landing on the ground, she took in the spectacle that had happened before her in disbelief.

Vilhelm had stopped both the bullets that had been fired at him by Maria with his sword. The crushed lead masses that were left of the rounds fell to the ground with a clinging sound.

"Impressive. You only took but a moment to aim right at the centre of the human body."

He had spoken those words such in a carefree manner that no one could mistake it for anything other than a jest.

Maria was overwhelmed, her body frozen at the overwhelming sword work. The puppets then came at her.

"N-No, stop!"

She let out a girlish scream, but once she had been grabbed hold of, she would not be able to break free with just plain arm strength. Maria was suppressed, like a helpless maiden.

"Stop! Don't touch me! Release me!"

"—You let out a pretty cute voice when you scream, don't you."

The calmly approaching Vilhelm sank the hilt of his sword into Maria's abdomen.

"If you let him hear such a cute scream, it might entice him into doing something, hmm?"

"Gr-ugh... Ly... le....."

While still groaning and murmuring, Maria fainted.

And with that, Vilhelm lost interest in her, and looked downwards from the edge of the terrace—at the dancing that was going on in the middle of the hall.

"Indeed..... this is the first time that I've controlled numbers like this."

Vilhelm sighed, and—the scarlet blade of the sword he held in his hand glimmered brilliantly. The amber encrusted onto the hilt of his sword started to shine, flickering so.

### Part 8

"Good work", said Lyle to Lunaria, after she had finished singing three songs. It was due to her that the atmosphere in the hall seemed to have grown even more wild and fun.

Just as the two of them were going to get some drinks, a masked guest that was dressed as a werewolf stopped before them.

"O lovely songstress, would you care to have a drink with us?"

A great number of people who seemed to be thinking of the same thing as the 'werewolf' had gathered behind him, fidgeting.

"...I'm afraid I must refuse. I cannot leave this man's side. As such, I humbly decline."

".....I see."

The 'werewolf' looked over at Lyle, muttering and murmuring something.

"Iseelseeitshimsheswithhim... thenitsfineifidothisitsfinefinefin....."

The 'werewolf' suddenly lunged at Lyle, who had been looking suspiciously at him.

"Whoa!"

Lyle hurriedly dodged the fist that came straight at his nose.

Just as the 'werewolf' was about to throw out a second punch, Lunaria rushed in and knocked him down. Although the 'werewolf' was rampaging violently, he was completely suppressed by the slender arm of the «Nosferatu» Lunaria.

Lunaria then chopped the 'werewolf' right in the back of his neck, and he promptly fainted.

"H-He was really trying to kill me..."

"Master Lyle, something seems off."

Lunaria called out to Lyle, who had turned pale, as she pulled off the mask of the 'werewolf' and flung it aside.

Masks were turned towards them.

Lyle acutely felt the gazes concentrated upon them, but it was completely different from earlier.

".....There's no hostility...?"

The masked guests who had turned their puppet-like eyes towards them, simultaneously took a step forward.

".....LyleLyleLyleLyleLyleLyleLyleeeeeeeee....."

"Seizegrabseizegrabseizegrabhunthunthunt....."

"Huhu, huhuhu, huhuhuhuhu..... huhuhuuuuuuunt!"

The masked crowd did not have a sense of unity about them. And then, they came at once, stampeding and rushing.

"W-Whoa....!"

Lyle panicked and ran away, and Lunaria followed him.

"DoOooooOooOon'T RuuuUuuuUuUun!"

Heading to the exit, they found themselves facing a wall of humans, the door shut behind them.

As they could not proceed past that, Lyle and Lunaria turned and ran further into the hall. It was worth a try to escape to the outside from the corridor.

"What the heck was that..... there's no reason for them to want to kill me, is there?"

"It looked like they were being manipulated. I believe that it was the effect of the spell, '*Puppetry*'."

"*Puppetry*'... is the culprit one of your brethren?"

One of the magical powers that the «Nosferatu» were capable of was the ability to manipulate the hearts of people, through the intermediary of their blood.

Lunaria's expressionless face stiffened.

"No... that should not be possible..."

She was making a difficult expression. Perhaps she was hiding something, as she seemed to be far more troubled than Lyle.

".....Anyway, we need to get away for now—"

"LYLEEEEEEEEEEEEE! ROT AND DROP DEAD AL—"

"My bad, Hazel!"

Lyle knocked down the zombie (Hazel) that came at him. However, the people who were being manipulated were still drawing closer from the other side of the corridor.

Together with Lunaria, Lyle darted into a nearby bend.

"...Oh crap."

No matter how many turns they took, Lyle and Lunaria were always forced back the way they came.

".....They're not attacking at random. They're being guided by something."

"Guided?"

"Yeah. It looks like they're trying to force me to go to the viewing platform on the upper floors."

Lyle's eyes brightened behind his glasses.

Lunaria's eyes widened.

Lyle was displaying the same perceptiveness he had a few days back, as though a switch had been flipped in him. It was hard to believe this was the same person who was normally so carefree.

".....What shall we do? Should we force our way through?"

"No, let's just go with it. If they're being guided by something, then the *Puppeteer* should be lying in wait."

Taking out the pocket watch that was encrusted with amber, Lyle proceeded onward.

As he had predicted, their course had been altered many times. The two of them then headed to the stairway that led to the viewing platform. After arriving at the viewing platform, Lyle closed the door behind them tightly, just in case. It could delay the masked guests who were after them for a bit longer.

Lyle and Lunaria's footsteps resounded in the viewing platform, where pillars of marble were lined up.

And like the Springfire Festival, there was a fire burning at the centre of the area.

At the opposite of the entrance, on the terrace that was jutting out, was an illuminated, fallen figure.

"Maria!?"

Instinctively, Lyle rushed forward—but he suddenly stopped.

".....As I thought, it is indeed difficult to control that many minds at once. Sending them into a frenzy was all I could manage. I'll have to keep that in mind next time."

A tall young man had stepped up onto the terrace where Maria was lying. He, who had his sword drawn in his hand, was none other than—

"...Lord Zest, were you responsible for what happened downstairs?"



Said Lyle, glowering at Vilhelm.

"Yeah, that's right. I apologise for having resorted to such methods."

"Are you... a magus?"

Lyle tightened his grip on the pocket watch.

Shaking his head, Vilhelm raised the sword in his hands upwards.

"That would be the work of this sword. This magic sword, to be exact."

"Magic sword?"

The blade gave off a faint crimson sheen, like that of a bloody moon. The amber inlaid onto the hilt of the sword as an ornament was shining with dusk-coloured light—the light of magical excitation energy.

"A magic sword... that manipulates humans....?"

"No—it is a magic sword that manipulates those whose blood it has absorbed."

The one who answered Lyle's question was the one standing beside him, Lunaria.

Lunaria stared at Vilhelm, her body quivering.

"...Once wielded by the 'King of the Night', the [Blade of Vampires].....  
<Dainsleif>!"

"Hmm, that does look like what's inscripted."

"Why..... Why do you have that!"

Lunaria shouted. A cry of anguish.

"That magic sword was sealed away by the Bloodline of the Fog... and was burned down together with my hometown..."

"Hmm..... You're one of them, as I suspected. Fate is certainly ironic."

Vilhelm looked down at the magic sword—Dainsleif, a sardonic smile on his face.

"It was handed over to me."

"Who did!?"

"I wonder who it was? Well, I shall tell you in due time."

Vilhelm broke off his eye contact with Lunaria, and looked at Lyle.

"Well then—Lyle. I'll ask you once more. Will you lend me your strength?"

"You dare....!"

It was no surprise Lyle lost it and raised his voice at Vilhelm, who had taken Maria hostage and gotten many innocent people involved.

"What do you want this time!"

"I need your power. So that I can obtain the <Erbe Der Last Hexe>."

".....<Erbe Der Last Hexe>?"

Hearing him mention that rumour—no, it was no mere rumour. Vilhelm's composure was calm. That was not the behaviour of someone who was chasing after a rumour.

"It should have been entrusted to you by «The Last Hexe». The <Erbe>—the key to unlocking the [Ingenious Engine]."

Vilhelm pointed the tip of his magic sword at the fainted Maria.

"Ideally, I'd like you to serve me loyally. However, if that's difficult for you, then I'll have to drain some of Miss Maria's blood with Dainsleif."

".....!"

The sound of Lyle's grinding teeth could be heard. There were a few vague points in what Vilhelm had said, but he had no choice but to agree—just as Lyle was thinking that,

"Do not defile that sword any further!"

Lunaria manifested the [Fog]. Her shining Eyes of Amber glaring at Vilhelm, she went on the offensive.

"Return it!"

".....Hmph."

Drawing back the sword he pointed at Maria, he blocked Lunaria's [Fog]. With one brandish of the magic sword, the tentacle of [Fog] that could smash even rock was dispersed.

"Heh. Truly, this is the magic sword of the «Nosferatu». It is effective against the magic of its own kind."

"Return it!"

Lunaria moved, as though gliding on the [Fog] that was creeping on the ground. With movements that could very well be described as 'Fogsliding', Lunaria was before Vilhelm in an instant, throwing a punch with her arm that was clad in [Fog].

An arm of fog that tore through the wind.

However, Vilhelm was suddenly in the air. In mid-air, where there were no footholds, he swung his sword skillfully. The tip of the magic sword cut into Lunaria's shoulder.

"A-ugh.... AAHH!"

Holding back the pain in her shoulder, Lunaria sent forth a torrent of [Fog] at Vilhelm who had landed.

Vilhelm sliced the wall of [Fog] right into two with the magic sword, to Lunaria's amazement, and retaliated, his blade biting into her chest this time, diagonally upwards from her chest to the shoulder.

".....It is to be expected that the «Nosferatu» cannot be taken control of. I'll just have to kill you then. Without hesitation, I will cut you and your brethren down."

Vilhelm raised his sword overhead, preparing to swing it down upon Lunaria, who was crouching in pain.

"Farewell, the last princess of the Fog—Oh?"

Taking a step back, Vilhelm brandished his magic sword.

The owl mask that had come flying at high speeds was split into two, falling onto the ground.

"Stop right there!"

Drawing out the magical power of the amber from his pocket watch, Lyle immediately started to cast his magic.

(—Controlling the motion of water vapour molecules—increasing the gravitational acceleration— !)

The hail that been formed over the sky of the viewing platform began to fall all at once. Combined with the increased gravitational acceleration, it could reach a deadly falling speed in a short period of time.

"Hahaha! Magnificent!"

Said Vilhelm, swinging his sword ecstatically. The lumps of ice that were hardly visible were knocked aside by the constantly flashing blade.

"...Lunaria!"

Shouting, Lyle created hail once more.

"The same thing is not going to—gah!?"

Lunaria's [Fog] shook the viewing platform. She could not fully concentrate on the attack, but the distraction was enough.

"Go!"

The rain of bullet-like hail fell on Vilhelm, who was engulfed in [Fog], battering him.

The sound of the solid ice's impact on the viewing platform resounded.

"The sword— !"

Lunaria rushed towards the dust-filled centre of devastation.

And then, a faint red blade cut through the dust.

Vilhelm approached the stumbling Lunaria, his smile dangerous.

"Unfortunately for you, this magic sword is rather sturdy!"

He had prevented a fatal injury by using the sword as a shield to protect himself from the hail that fell perpendicular to the ground—though he was not completely unharmed; rather than being impressed, Lyle felt more fearful of the monstrous grit he had displayed.

Vilhelm suddenly turned about and continued towards Lunaria, who had fallen down behind him. It seemed he was still cautious of Lyle's hailstorm.

The magic sword was brought down on Lunaria.

Using the [Fog] that she had gathered, she stopped the slash. The [Fog] was highly versatile, capable of transforming into a shield, a foothold, or a tentacle, and it just barely managed to stop the blindingly fast sword work.

Lyle was worried, but he could not do anything to protect her in melee combat. He could only watch on.

"You're good at being on the defence—but what can you accomplish if you do not attack, princess from the Bloodline of the Fog?"

Vilhelm asked while throwing out slashes.

Lunaria's expression hardened.

"What you should be doing here now—is to escape, isn't it?"

"...Shut up."

"Is there a reason not to? You'll be safe if you simply run away. Just like you once did."

"Shut up."

"Protecting others here—or fighting for them, what could come out of it? You should just run away. Go on, do it."

"Shut up!"

Lunaria sent an overarm strike his way. Clad in a helical-shaped [Fog], it was a powerful punch, packed with power enough to kill someone instantly.

Vilhelm smirked.

Carrying his magic sword on his shoulders, he caught and shifted Lunaria's overarm strike upwards hard, using his own body weight.

Lunaria's body floated into the air. Generally, a person's physical strength was not so much different from how strong they looked.

Vilhelm then sank his boots right into the abdomen of the now defenceless girl.

Thump! A frightening sound could be heard resounding forth.

The slender body flew parallel to the ground, smashing against the fence of the viewing platform.

Instead of screaming, Lunaria vomited blood, her body trapped by the now bent fence.

".....Hmph. You might have been able to protect something, were you not so easily provoked."

The smile he had during the fight faded away, and Vilhelm sighed, as though bored.

"Lunaria!"

Just as Lyle was about to rush over to her, the burning torch at the centre of the area was hacked apart, sending embers flying everywhere.

Stumbling about, Lyle held up the pocket watch, scattering the sparks.

"—You're the most troublesome of all. You're versatile, thus the tactics you can employ are many."

Lyle turned about instantly at the voice that had come from behind, but before he could do anything, his right hand was struck. The pocket watch that his master had passed down to him was knocked onto the ground.

First was his wrist, and then his jaw was grabbed. Lyle found himself completely restrained.

"That pocket watch had amber inserted onto it, didn't it. And without it, you're out of options."

Vilhelm whispered into his ear from his back.

Lyle felt goosebumps rising from that chilling sensation.

"Now, let's go back to the beginning. Lyle, give me the key."

"What are you talking—"

"It exists, doesn't it? Erllua Azoth must have entrusted the key to the <Erbe> to you, her one and only disciple, after her disappearance."

".....The only thing that Master had left me before she disappeared was that pocket watch."

Groaning, Lyle looked towards the pocket watch that had been knocked away—and frowned.

The impact against the ground had damaged its exterior, exposing the interior of the pocket watch. And what was inside of it, were not the mechanisms of a pocket watch as far as Lyle knew.

There were no springs or cog-wheels, and most of the interior was occupied by a black mass.

Around the black mass were many lines, which were flickering with a bluish-white colour at regular intervals.

"It's... not a mechanical pocket watch..... that's....."

"Ha... haha..... I see. That is it. That's the key to the <Erbe>!"

Behind the wide-eyed Lyle, Vilhelm had a big smile on his face.

"Hmph, it's finally in my hands. Well then, Lyle, I'm going to bring you along with me."

"Who's going to— !"

The hand around his jaw twisted about, forcefully turning his head around, and pushed his face against the ground. Vilhelm's well-featured face was close enough for Lyle to feel his breath on him. His blue eyes, sharp like a blade, looked right at Lyle.

"I dislike using brute force. But as much as I dislike it, I have no choice but to resort to it this time. Though, if you see *that*, you might be in the mood to change your mind."

"That'? The <Erbe>, you mean?"

"Yes. That is the——— !"

Vilhelm, who looked as though he was about to kiss Lyle, released his hold and jumped backwards instantly. Immediately after, the spot where he was standing at was pierced with many throwing knives.



"—Who goes there!"

Shouted Vilhelm, as he gripped his sword tighter. Turning about, he found that the other party was atop one of the stone pillars at the other side.

"Ask if you will, but I have no name to give thee—I am merely a beautiful young maid."

The figure who had introduced herself nimbly stepped off the pillar onto the viewing platform. The embers that had been scattered about from the fallen torch illuminated a familiar face of a girl Lyle knew.

"Milla..."

"Good evening, Master Lyle."

The maid with blond hair and light-brown skin, who was also Maria's direct subordinate, pinched the sides of her apron dress and made a curtsy.

"Milla... why are you here?"

"For some reason, there were a lot of zombie-like people wandering about. And so, I came up here."

Saying that, Milla pointed at a hooked rope that was entwined around the fence.

"There is no need to be surprised. Have I not always been the best at tree-climbing?"

Lyle returned Milla's bright side with only a look of amazement.

On the other hand, Vilhelm who had been interfered with, had a face contorted with displeasure.

".....A mere servant dares to oppose me, a Margrave?"

"I answer to only my mistress, Lady Maria."

"I see. Very well—you had best fulfill your duty to the very end, then!"

Vilhelm broke into a run, magic sword in hand.

Milla responded in the same way, going head-on at him.

"Milla! If that sword even scratches you—"

At the same time as Lyle's warning, <Dansleif> was swung downwards.

Evading the pale crimson blade by a paper-thin margin, Milla was suddenly at Vilhelm's back, with ghostly movements.

"What?"

The astonished Vilhelm hastily guarded the back of his neck with the magic sword.

*\*Garin\*!*

The clash of metal scattered sparks about.

"How regrettable. You have fast reflexes."

Before anyone had realised it, Milla was holding a whip-like weapon in her hands. But where there were supposed to be thick leather and cord, there were only steel blades thinner than razors.

"What a strange-looking weapon.... which reminds me. I had heard that the previous leader of the Highline Foundation had a bodyguard with certain remarkable skills."

The smile had returned to Vilhelm's face, and his mouth opened as though reciting a poem.

"And that assassin bodyguard... could you have been the rumoured, 'Assassin Slayer'?"

"What a distasteful thing to do, Sir Margrave. Trying to expose a woman's secrets, that is."

While still maintaining her smile, Milla swung the whip of razor-sharp, thin blades.

It was like a whip, but far more lethal. The steel 'whip-sword' lashed out at Vilhelm, drawing a spiral arc in the air.

Vilhelm intercepted the attack with a horizontal slash from <Dainsleif>.

However, the trajectory of the whip-sword changed right before the clash between weapons, and it went directly downwards. Bouncing off the stone floor, the tip of the razor blades headed straight for Vilhelm's jaw.

Vilhelm had barely managed to evade that attack.

"Haha! No doubt that this is equal to even the likes of demonic and faerie blades! Indeed, the assassin is well-matched with her blade!"

Vilhelm replied, while returning with attacks of his own.

The whip-sword was ill-suited for receiving blows. Though a scratch or two would not make it unusable—it still ought to have been a one-sided fight. However, Milla was able to dodge every single attack that came her way.

"Well dodged!"

"You give me too much credit."

Dodging backwards, Milla lashed out with her whip-sword. The flexible whip-sword wrapped itself around <Dainsleif>.

The sounds of the magic sword and the whip-sword grinding against each other could be heard.

"—Impressive."

"Nowadays, this is a basic requirement of being a maid. There is no need for such praise."

"Heh, I wish I had a maid as skilled as you are. I could make you obey me with this magic sword, but..... Well, the door is always open. It is regrettable, but there are things I must attend to... !"

Suddenly, there were sounds of footsteps on the stone floor.

From the shadow of the stone pillars on the other side of the viewing platform, emerged the figures of numerous puppets.

Although they had many opportunities to join the fray, it seemed like they had been waiting up till now, just in case.

"Well then, what will you do, my lady maid? At this rate, Lyle is going to be in danger, isn't he?"

Vilhelm then blew a sharp whistle.

The youths who had been made into puppets lunged at Lyle. Though he had taken a defensive stance, without amber, he could not use any magic.

"Master Lyle!"

Letting go of her whip-sword, Milla leapt aside. With the hilts of the knives concealed in her sleeves, she struck and neutralised them.

"Sorry about that, Milla."

"Don't—In all honesty, I would not have had a chance of winning, had the fight been dragged on. And so I aimed for a tie... but everything was a little too late."

Milla's face darkened as she surveyed the viewing platform, her body drenched with sweat.

"...It looks like he escaped using the rope I had come up here with. I am very sorry."

".....No, I was also at fault."

The pocket watch was also gone. It was most likely taken away by Vilhelm, who had called it a 'key'. In its place, a piece of paper was left.

".....Damn it."

Crushing the piece of paper in his hand, Lyle cursed.

"...Milla. Let's leave this place for now. How is Lunaria doing?"

"She is still breathing. I will carry her."

Lyle nodded, and turned his gaze westward, past the centre of the royal capital, where a massive fire illuminated the white castle of Ilsestein—towards the outskirts.

**'The multi-purpose plaza in the western outskirts of the royal capital  
The first military shipyard  
The third factory site'**

That was what had been written on the piece of paper which was left behind.

## Chapter 4 – Legacy of the Last Hexe

### Part 0

*Once, a boy was asked by his master.*

*"What kind of person do you want to grow up to be?"*

*The boy then answered that he wanted to become someone like his master.*

*His master managed a wry smile to that reply.*

*"Lyle..... well, I don't know what kind of person you think I am, but I don't want you to become like me. Don't you know that masters always want their disciples to surpass them?"*

*So said the boy's master, while stroking his head.*

*".....People can't always be chasing after someone. Someday, they have to stand on their own, and find their own path to walk. That is why, Lyle, you must find the path that you, and only you, can tread. Be it left or right, be it forwards or backwards, to proceed or to retreat—you can think about it, when the time comes.*

*And so, Lyle—what kind of person do you want to grow up to be?"*

*The boy thought about it.*

*His master's question was rather vague. To begin with, it had not felt like a question to him.*

*After racking his brain over it, he answered his master with the thought that had surfaced in his mind earlier.*

*It was a normal, boring answer.*

*"I see. If that's what you want, Lyle, then you will have to become more prideful, and stand up taller than anybody else. —Don't worry, you'll be alright. After all, you're my one and only....."*

*And so the boy's master, as though she were a different person from earlier, stroked his hair ever so gently.*

### Part 1

Lyle, who had taken refuge in his laboratory, took out some high-purity amber from the bottom of his desk's drawer.

Exciting the amber, he focused magical power into Lunaria, who was lying on the sofa. The serious wounds she had suffered on her shoulder and chest slowly closed up, as she took in the light.

"Now—I need to come up with a plan."

Leaking out a sigh, Lyle shifted the curtains and looked outside.

Students in strange costumes were prowling about the academy grounds. Coupled with their sleepwalk-like movements, it was like a scene from a nightmare.

"Master Lyle, do you think it would be difficult to force our way through, with your magic and my weapons?"

In a humble tone, Milla suggested a drastic measure.

Lyle shook his head.

"We also need to take control of the situation, and not just force our way. I can't leave them like this."

"Is that what you should be doing, Master Lyle?"

"'Magic must be kept secret. They are but illusions made into fabrication.' — That is an unspoken rule for magi. As the <Disciple of the Last Hexe>, I cannot break that rule."

Lyle declared while spinning the amber about in his hands, and then he took out the piece of paper that Vilhelm had left behind from his pocket.

".....I will head for this place. Milla, I'd like you to watch over the academy."

"Are you going there alone?"



"It'd be dangerous for the people being manipulated to leave the academy. Please contain them within the academy. You're good at that, right?"

"Well yeah... I did do my fair share of locking up bad kids in the shed at my mistress' bidding."

Milla looked a bit nostalgic.

"However... Master Lyle, I can't really let you go alone....."

"Don't worry about it. Expecting that something will probably happen, that in itself is a form of preparation."

Lyle then took something that had been hidden, out from the bottom of the desk. It was a high-calibre, top-break, single-shot revolver.

"Don't you think that that dandy noble needs a few more opponents to go up against him?"

"Well... this gun is just a regular one, though."

Lyle tucked the gun and various other things into his belt, and pocketed the bullets that he had crafted himself. Over his formal suit, he put on the academy's overcoat.

".....If you insist on doing so, would you at least take some of my equipment along with you?"

Asked the worried Milla.

Just as Lyle was about to reply that he would be fine,

".....In that case, please give me a sword."

Lunaria said, as she rose to her feet, shaking her head.

"Please give me a sword... as I will be going with him."

"You should be resting. Though you have recovered your magical power, heading off right away is simply too much....."

"That man had the magic sword of the Nebulablut."

Said Lunaria, with a frantic look on her face.

".....I understand."

Lyle nodded.

He felt uneasy about it, but if she was going to go regardless, it would be best if they went together.

"Milla, you... don't have a sword, do you?"

"I do."

"...There is."

"It has been rather dangerous as of late."

Milla who had an anxious look on her face, said that and passed a key over to Lyle.

"It is the key to the baggage compartment of the horse carriage. Please do as you please with it."

"...Thank you."

Taking the key, Lyle continued his preparations.

Milla then whispered to Lunaria, who was checking her body's condition and standing up.

"—Lady Lunaria, I know I am making a selfish request, but please, take care of the two of them."

Milla bowed her head to Lunaria.

Lunaria remained silent, and suddenly nodded.

"—All right, let's go. First, we need to hurry to Maria's carriage."

Dashing out of the living quarters, the three of them ran through an opening within the puppets.

Page 2

Maria was in ill humour.

Her rendezvous with Lyle had been disrupted, the dress she had picked out was dirtied, the dinner that Milla prepared had also gone to waste, and worst of all, the rope that tied her to the chair felt horrible.

"I wish you'd stop making that kind of face."

Maria glared at Vilhelm, who had remarked in a carefree manner.

"—Why don't you untie these ropes then?"

"If I do that, won't I just get slapped again?"

"You tied me up pretty tightly, didn't you."

"Then just stay like that and don't move."

Vilhelm shrugged his shoulders.

Maria had been brought to a rather dull place.

It bore a slight resemblance to a church. There were many pipes, which looked like those of a pipe organ, lined up on the wall which had been distorted into the shape of a fan. And further inside, was a raised platform on the ground, on which an input device which looked like a keyboard could be seen.

But the smell of oil and steel that permeated the area was not something a person would expect to smell in a church. The impression that was given off would be that of machines, cold and robotic, with an emphasis on efficiency and functionality.

".....Hah."

".....Stop sighing in that bored manner that makes it seem like you're thinking, 'this is so pointless', it makes me feel sick."

"Was I sighing?"

Vilhelm looked surprised.

"Still, you're right. I was thinking that this was rather pointless. You had the power, but you gave up on your chance to make the most out of it. Your attitude to Lyle was what I thought was pointless. You erred in your method of handling him."

"Don't just degrade me however you please."

"I was not. I merely spoke the truth."

His monologue had been indifferent, but Vilhelm's tone hinted at the emotions concealed beneath.

".....Hah. Well, you can be used as a bargaining tool against Lyle. As long as you have that kind of worth, I will guarantee your safety and well-treatment."

"....."

"Oh right... let me ask you something. Why do you bear such goodwill towards Lyle Waldstein? I might learn something useful out of it, so do tell me."

It was at that moment, that Maria hated the fact that she could not move her hands more than anything else. If she at least had one hand free—

"—As if I'll tell you, you dunce!"

Sticking out her tongue and going, 'beh', she scoffed at Vilhelm.

".....Oh well. It wasn't all that important."

Saying just that, Vilhelm fell into silence.

'Hmph', snorted Maria.

(.....You couldn't understand it the last time anyway.)

After snorting another time, Maria relaxed her body. It was in preparation for later, when she would have to go all out.

And so Maria placed her faith in her childhood friend, and rested her body.

### Part 3

The third factory site at the first military shipyard in the western outskirts was located a distance away from the multi-purpose plaza. The water drainage there was poor and hence the place was difficult to put to use—that seemed to be the reason the authorities had abandoned the site. So, what had been the reason for constructing a factory at that sort of place?

Lyle soon saw the answer to his questions.

At the centre of the open field, a dim light was being leaked from a cave entrance. The cave was reinforced with concrete, and there was even a proper stairways.

It was obvious that the water drainage would be bad. This was because there was a basement beneath the third factory site. Furthermore, it was a massive basement at that. Most likely, that was the reason for the poor water drainage.

Giving his thanks to the horses that had pulled their horse carriage here, Lyle descended into the underground.

The staircase was lighted at various intervals by lamps, and the steps had been well-paved, hence it was not difficult to traverse. It was just that, it had collected a fair amount of dust due to what was likely long years of abandon. And on that dust, were fresh footprints, hinting at the fact that several people had most likely been here recently.

Finally reaching the end, Lyle swallowed his breath as he took in the sight before him.

It was as he suspected, there was a colossal, man-made underground space. The sheer size of it made the hall in the academy where the ball had been held at look like a child's sandbox.

However, what surprised Lyle the most was the huge structure enshrined in the middle of the underground space.

"This is....."

It was a rigid airship, and its entire body was wrapped in metal. The envelope meant to bring up the airframe measured over two hundred metres in length. The gondola, which supported the multi-layered deck, was about as tall as a three-storey building. On various places of the airframe, there were batteries and suitable partitioning covers for them.

"An immense airship... no, a 'flying warship', huh....."

Left behind and forgotten in the underground, it was a rather fitting object for the remnants of the military shipyard.

The flying warship was an airship that was outfitted with firepower. Ever since the dawn of the airship, they were frequently proposed to be put into practical use. However, every proposal for it had been rejected.

The reason was simple. There was a problem in the payload capacity.

Normal airships could fly due to strict weight adjustments. The armour that protected the warship, the high output steam engine, the armaments and ammunition, all of those already took up a huge amount of weight.

The most troublesome of all, were the personnel needed to man the warship. During the Age of Discovery, what usually took up the most capacity were the humans in the vessel. Outfitting the airship with complex weapon systems for battle, would make the airship excessively unstable.

"That's the <Erbe Der Last Hexe>.....?"

Surveying the sight before him with a doubtful look, Lyle affirmed that the hatch in the rear of the flying warship was wide open.

His mouth pursed, Lyle headed into the interior of the warship.

The interior was already lit up by lamps. And those lamps indicated the path in which Lyle should proceed in.

It looked like the steam engine was already running, as a light tremor could be felt from the ground and walls.



There were pipes overhead in the narrow passageway; the conditions were ill-suited for living in. The interior denoted silently that the airframe was a thing purely dedicated for use in war.

At the end of the passageway, was a space, which had an appearance drastically different from the passageway leading up to it. As for how it looked like, it would resemble a church the most. On the opposite side of the entrance, namely, near the front of the vessel, a gigantic pipe organ-like device had been enshrined.

"—Welcome."

At the base of the pipe organ-like device, stood a lone man, sword thrust into the ground.

"To the <Erbe Der Last Hexe>—The core of the flying warship, <Ymir><sup>1</sup>."

Vilhelm Zest smiled, looking as though he were tired of waiting.

While glaring at Vilhelm, Lyle observed the device resembling a massive pipe organ behind.

The parts which looked like pipes, were cylinders that lined up wheels, which engraved numerals. Those were lined up in a row on the surface of the wall, attached to the enormous gears and cranks. And at the 'keydesk' of the pipe organ, a huge keyboard of a typewriter had been installed.

Vilhelm was standing before that keyboard, and right next to him, was Maria, tied to a simple chair. Seeing that there were no visible wounds on her seemingly ill-humoured self, Lyle heaved a sigh of relief.

"—Do you know what this device that had been installed in the bridge of <Ymir> is? It is something that you had once proposed, a mechanism that had been publicised by «The Last Hexe»."

Vilhelm asked, as though he were testing Lyle.

Lyle had understood immediately. Once, he had imagined its entire diagram.

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<sup>1</sup> Ymir is the ancestor of all *jotun*, the frost giants, in Norse Mythology. The kanji being used is 'King of Giants'.

The Difference Engine that Lyle had come up with—a calculator that powered a steam engine. Although it was something that calculated the certainty of possible outcomes through predetermined behaviours, the calculations it was capable of were comparatively simple in nature, and hence it was faster to do the calculations on paper. Due to that, it was treated like a toy.

However, the calculator was merely the simple first stage. If a semi-automatic machine was implemented, then there would be a next stage. That would surely be—

"Yes, it is no calculator, but a mechanical brain that processes orders—the [Ingenious Engine]."

A mechanical system that governs its own functions based on an order—Lyle had thought of the theory behind it, but he did not think that the current level of technology could have completed it.

That was what laid before his eyes.

"The hull of <Ymir>, was a prototype for the implementation of the concept of a 'flying warship'. As it was a complete failure, it had been abandoned. After the shipyard above ground was burned down, it was just left as it is now.

Erllua Azoth was the one who had her eye on this failed project. She had once collaborated with the military before, and thus, it is likely she was able to learn of this vessel's existence. What she truly wanted was probably, a device strong enough to power the Ingenious Engine, which needed a complex and huge power source.

However, can you understand what kind of 'power' can be born from the union of a war machine and the Ingenious Engine?"

"....."

It went without saying that Lyle understood.

If the flying warship was outfitted with the Ingenious Engine, then most of the problems that the airship faced regarding weight capacity would be eliminated. If a 'program' was installed into the Ingenious Engine beforehand,

then the machine would be able to operate on its own afterwards. The soldiers manning the cannons, the personnel adjusting the outputs—the problem of the 'heavy human baggage' weighing down the flying warship would be resolved in one fell swoop.

"If that could be mass-produced, it would likely become a ground-breaking form of weaponry. If properly maintained, they would be machines that would not get their orders wrong, nor grow tired. No doubt, they would be the ideal weapon."

Vilhelm said while looking satisfied, as if he were looking at an interesting toy.

Should that 'ideal weapon' ever be released, the deaths that it would bring would easily number in the hundreds, no, thousands—he understood that fact, and admired its power.

"When I first came across this, I had been excited to no end—but this Ingenious Engine did not function. I did not have the 'key' to start up this machine."

Vilhelm indicated the opening in the upper region of the keyboard. It was about the size of a person's palm, and was round in shape—it would be just right for something like a pocket watch to fit into.

"The conversion key for the machine to interpret the order that had been entered through calculation—that was what I have been searching for."

Saying that, Vilhelm took out the pocket watch he had taken from Lyle—the pocket watch Lyle had been given by Erllua. Removing the outer cover and the watch glass, he took out the 'interior' of the pocket watch.

It was a black, lenticular object. The part connected to the needle of the watch was protruding out, like a key. The lines that ran around the surface were flickering with light in systematic intervals.

"It is likely that this would activate <Ymir>. And for what comes after, you are necessary."

Turning towards Lyle, Vilhelm extended his arm, overflowing with vigour.

"In the absence of «The Last Hexe», you are the most knowledgeable person after her—no, you would know the Ingenious Engine even better than the «Witch». Your power is necessary. Lyle Waldstein, come with me. Together with the <Ymir>, we will let the entire world know of your talent."

"....."

Lyle looked intently at the outstretched hand, and the Ingenious Engine behind Vilhelm, in silence.

He had been rather moved by the notion. That the mechanisms he had formed in his mind had been materialised before his very eyes, there was no way someone who studied science would not be moved.

He wanted to show the Ingenious Engine to others. That was a natural desire that Lyle had.

".....I must humbly decline your offer."

After a short pause of several seconds, Lyle expectedly refused.

Vilhelm's face darkened. It seemed that Lyle's answer had not been within his expectations.

"Yeah, I was the one who had come up with the Ingenious Engine. However, it was not for this sort of purpose."

".....Are you denying yourself the opportunity to realise your own power, and your own worth?"

"My goal was not to create a weapon. I cannot stand by and watch it used as a weapon right from its 'birth'."

"Wisdom and knowledge are 'power'. There's no worth in having power that you do not use. And the fastest way to increase its worth—is to wield power as a weapon."

Vilhelm shook his head as if he were clearing away a headache, and whispered in a chagrined voice.

"Although I'd have liked to have him cooperate with me out of his own will, I guess I have no other choice."

Vilhelm drew the sword at his waist.

"It looks like there's no other way to go about this."

The faint crimson magic sword was pointed towards Maria.

Maria snorted her nose, as if she were provoking him.

"—What a foul man you are."

"The ends justifies the means. Well then—what will you do, Lyle?"

".....If that's how you want it, then I'll be taking a hostage as well."

"A hostage? I don't have anyone you can...!"

Vilhelm was at a loss for words.

Maria's eyes widened in surprise.

From the breast pocket of his overcoat, Lyle had taken out a cylinder-shaped object. That which looked somewhat like a tenderiser, with a metal tube attached to the wooden handle, was a...

"To think you had a hand grenade..."

The stick grenade, was one of the most cutting-edge weapons, along with the bolt-action rifle. Due to the fact that it used a detonator instead of an ignition fuse, the increased amount of safety was one of its selling points.

"Where on earth did you get that from..."

"Getting to know the compounding method of explosives and how to produce a detonator, was unexpectedly fun."

Lyle placed his finger on the cord at the end of the handle.

"If you don't want to be blown to bits, then you had best release Maria right away."

".....This is some outrageous plan you've come up with."

His composure up till this point in time utterly disrupted, Vilhelm's expression stiffened, for the first time.

"It is just the most rational one with the highest probability of success."

Lyle smiled sweetly.

"Put too high of a value on me, didn't you, Lord Zest? Now, what will *you* do?"

"...At this range, I will take but a second and a half to close the distance. It takes quite some time for a hand grenade to detonate, doesn't it?"

"In that case—would you care to give it a go?"

Said Lyle, and he promptly pulled the cord.

"Lyle!"

"Damn—"

Before Maria shouted out, Vilhelm had broken into a run.

It was just as he said; Vilhelm took a little less than two seconds to reach Lyle, and knocked the hand grenade from his hands.

"That was close— !"

Although the hand grenade exploded, what assailed them was no shock wave, but an intense flash of light.

"Wait, this is a— !"

"Don't worry about it!"

Lyle who had covered his face beforehand, ran past Vilhelm, who had his hands over his eyes.

"That was just an example of chemiluminescence!"

Lyle headed for Maria at full speed.

Although Maria was blinded by the intense light as well, sensing Lyle's presence, her face quickly glowed with joy.

"Lylee~"

"Glad to see that you're alright, Maria."

Lyle started to untie the ropes that were restraining Maria.

"Lyle, behind you!"

Turning about abruptly, Lyle found that Vilhelm was heading right back for him. Though he had not recovered from the blinding light just yet, he had extended his hands out towards Lyle.

"Just give it— !"

A flash of silver that came from above.

With just his intuition, Vilhelm had counterattacked with his magic sword.

"It's you..."

Lunaria who had came falling from the ceiling, had a long sword of steel in her hands.

Vilhelm went into a safe defensive position.

Seeing that his fighting prowess had not gone down at all despite his deteriorated eyesight, Lunaria released the [Fog]. Blocking Vilhelm's field of vision, she grabbed both Lyle and Maria, and 'fogslided' away, putting some distance between them and Vilhelm.

".....You sure pulled a fast one on me, Lyle."

After blinking his eyes, Vilhelm glared at Lyle.

"—What on earth was that earlier?"

"It had been powdered metal—a chemiluminescence reaction created using some aluminium and combustion agents."

Untying the ropes binding Maria, who had been dragged along with her chair, Lyle turned around and faced Vilhelm.

"I don't have the skills to make real explosives, due to the precision needed."

"I fell for your trap, didn't I. Good grief..... you're full of surprises."

Although he was the one who had been at a disadvantage, Vilhelm still smiled, looking excited.

"All the more reason—to not let you return!"

Spinning around, Vilhelm ran towards the base of the Ingenious Engine.

Lyle did not even have the time to stop him.

The core of the pocket watch from the «Witch» was inserted into the 'keyhole' of the Ingenious Engine.

With a small click, the countless numbers of wheels started to turn all at once.

"—*Ascend.*"

Vilhelm's fingers began to tap on the upper part of the keyboard.

In that moment, the sound of running steam engines grew louder, and with a stir, the control deck—the flying warship began to tremble greatly.



### Part 4

The performing arts festival held at the multi-purpose plaza in the western outskirts of the royal capital had ended, and the performers were drinking themselves silly in celebration. A certain powerful noble had gifted them with a generous amount of beer and spirits. Those who knew that said noble was Vilhelm Zest numbered few, and those who wanted to leave the third factory site numbered none.

After all, if they could enjoy the drink, they would not care about all the other little things.

Initially, they had thought that the trembling was due to their insobriety.

And then, those who were less drunk had pointed it out.

"Hahaha, look! I'm so wasted, I'm seeing airships!"

Practically all of them had ignored it and continued their merry-making.

"Hahaha, excellent!"

One part of the wall of the central deck in the flying warship <Ymir> retracted just as the warship began to rise, and was replaced by a glass pane that projected the scenery outside. It conferred on them a feeling of being distant from the ground.

By simply operating the keyboard, the massive flying warship was controlled. The Ingenious Engine that functioned as the core of <Ymir> was undoubtedly something that would change the way wars would be waged. Although it could only support something as large-scale as a flying warship, if a downsized version were to be available, its worth would be unmeasurable.

"Hahahaha! Excellent! You are truly a genius, Lyle Waldstein!"

"....."

Lyle answered Vilhelm's compliments with only silence.

He had invented it, but it was being used in the worst conceivable way. He could not find the appropriate words to describe his regret.

".....What should we do, Lyle?"

Whispered Maria, who was patting her arms and shoulders after being released from her bindings.

"He's gone at it quite a number of times, but that dandy noble doesn't have any openings."

".....There are ways to stop this flying warship even if we do not shut down the Ingenious Engine."

Automated it may be, but that also meant that it was a complex system. A complex machine had many weaknesses that could be exploited. For example, if the head could not be cut off, then one simply had to crush its heart—

Lyle attempted to slowly retreat, but Vilhelm seemed to have guessed his intentions, and tapped the keyboard with his fingers.

And immediately, a banging sound came from the passageway that led to the central deck, and it was shut with a steel door.

"The way to the warship's core is now shut. What will you do now?"

"....."

"Lyle."

Maria clapped the now silent Lyle on the shoulders.

"I don't know what you're thinking of... but you can make use of me."

Turning around, Lyle saw that Maria was wearing a rather dangerous smile.

"I'm pretty strong no matter how you look at me, hm?"

"...I know that."

Lyle smiled wryly.

It was somewhat deplorable for him, but before he made an all-in gamble, it seemed he had no choice but to borrow her strength.

".....Lunaria, pass me the pack."

Taking the pack which Lunaria had been carrying on her back, Lyle took out the weapons inside one after another.

"Here you go, Maria."

Taking her favourite rifle and a belt filled with bullets that was passed to her, Maria went, "Whoa, would you look at this." The tip of the rifle had been equipped with a bayonet.

"Now we're ready for battle."

"Alright... what about you, Lunaria?"

".....I am ready."

The girl who was staring at Vilhelm replied softly to Lyle.

"Currently, you're the only one who can oppose that magic sword of his. I need you to buy some time for us."

".....Understood."

Lunaria tightened her grip on the sword in her hands.

"Lunaria will give us some time. Maria, I'll be needing your assistance."

"Roger that."

"Done with your little chat?"

Vilhelm who had turned and faced them, was approaching, magic sword in hand.

Taking the initiative, Lunaria dashed out at him.

Wearing a bored expression, Vilhelm threw out an attack at the «Nosferatu» who was clad in [Fog], her Eyes of Amber glowing with the light of magical excitation.

He deflected the outstretched [Fog] with the magic blade, which shared the same nature in their magic.

"—Ugh!"

Lunaria slashed with her sword, and it grazed the tip of Vilhelm's nose as he jumped back. The next instant, a stake of [Fog] followed up with another attack. Jumping aside, Vilhelm hacked at everything in his way.

"A combination attack using both your [Fog] and a sword. It is more troublesome to deal with, but..."

Using her 'fogsliding' movement which confused the sense of distance of people, Lunaria closed the distance, swinging her blade at Vilhelm. He guarded the attack with ease. The tendril of [Fog] that followed up went for his weak point, but it was completely dodged, brushed away and hacked apart.

"It seems you've gotten a little better. I can see the strength and skill behind your sword, but it is not enough to overcome me. And neither is your [Fog]."

Having seen through her tactics, Vilhelm went on the attack.

As though the battle on the viewing platform had been but a mere warm-up, the speed and power of the magic blade multiplied.

"Kgh—"

Lunaria felt her hand go numb as she took the attack from the magic blade. Though she had also guarded with the [Fog], the magic blade had went through it like a hot knife through butter. The tip grazed Lunaria's slender neck, and blood began to flow.

"Ow—"

"Do not resist. This is but an act of mercy, as you will be reunited with your brethren."

"...What do you know about us?"

Pressing down on her neck, Lunaria glared sternly at Vilhelm.

"From who exactly did you receive that magic blade from...?"

"Of course, from those who had burned down your hometown."

Gently caressing the blade of the magic sword, Vilhelm said.

"Besides the House of Zest, there are also others who have had secret agreements with the Phantasm. This includes those who proposed changes, in order to adapt to this new world transformed by the <Steam Engine Revolution>—those who were of the Fog had rejected the new ways, and thus, were consequently destroyed as a result, were they not?"

The young Margrave, looked right back at Lunaria, his eyes filled with pity.

"Well, they had it coming. They were always cooped up in their own world. Hidden in darkness, the Phantasms passed those dark days. Unable to realise that they were trapped by the covenants of the olden days, their narrow-minded ideology rejected change—no different from those nobles who had fallen into ruin, no longer able to be sustained by just their lineage. Utterly worthless, with not a single bit of productivity. It is no surprise they were destroyed, those of the Fog, that is."

"Silence!"

Shouting out loud, Lunaria hacked at Vilhelm. He deflected both blade and [Fog] as though it were child's play.

Lunaria's onslaught was incessant, reckless.

"My father... my mother... my sisters... How dare you insult their name!"

"Why do you feel anger? Why do you feel resentment? There's no meaning in it, no matter what you do."

"Shut up!"

"I'm sure that even you yourself understand that there's no meaning in your anger, right?"

At his gentle voice, Lunaria's face was contorted, as though she was about to break out in tears.

"S-Silence...!"

"Truly, you have no worth. After all, you aren't even doing the things you should be doing here. Which is—to run away, isn't it?"

"Silen.....!"

"Yes, you left those of the Fog behind and fled. You *failed to die*."

"....."

With Vilhelm's every whisper, Lunaria's movement seemed to become visibly wilder and wilder. Her aim with her swords strikes and the [Fog] lessened.

Vilhelm was a formidable warrior, but he was no novice in the art of speechcraft either.

He had said that the most important thing to have as a noble, was to possess 'eyes that can judge'. And so, the young Margrave had seen right through the weaknesses of the «Nosferatu» girl.

"Why be angry over some insults? There's no need to mourn, nor reason to grieve—not for you, who had thrown away even the worth of anger and fled, is there?"

"A... AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!"

Lunaria screamed. Like a child throwing a tantrum, she entrusted everything to her anger, and swung her sword.

Vilhelm struck aside Lunaria's direct downward slash with a horizontal blow from the magic blade.

*\*Bakin\*!*

A high-pitched sound was produced as Lunaria's sword was cleaved in two.

Vilhelm then drove his palm right into the dumbfounded Lunaria's belly. The merciless blow from that tempered, well-trained body sent Lunaria flying away, throwing up blood, helplessly sprawling over the ground.

"...A-Argh..... U-Urgh....."

She had no strength left in her body. Her body shook, trembling.

Even so, she struggled to stand, her sword falling from her hands and onto the ground.

The sword was broken. A blade that had been rendered useless. It was—just like her own self.

The moment she laid her eyes on that blade that had almost been broken off at the hilt, Lunaria finally gave up. She could no longer find any strength nor will.

"That's right. A pitiful corpse which has lost its pride and ego is practically worthless."

Slowly walking towards her, Vilhelm raised the magic sword, as though he were an executioner.

"Now begone...?"

Noticing that something was wrong, Vilhelm turned around.

Lyle and Maria were there, tearing off a certain part of the wall.

Part 5

"Just as predicted...!"

Removing the maintenance hatch of the control deck with help from Maria, Lyle found what he was looking for.

"Yup, this is Master's work. I thought she'd definitely have prepared something like this."

Although it was not something like the keyboard in front of the Ingenious Engine, a small terminal with a list of numerals had been installed there. It was a backup, in case the keyboard to enter the commands with broke down.

"Will you be able to manage?"

"I'll do something about it."

Replying to Maria's question, he placed the terminal in his lap. He was overcome with emotion. It was unlike his usual self.

—The fruits of the technology he had invented.

It existed in reality. There existed no scientist who would not be happy to see their ideas be turned to reality.

That feeling could not be so easily erased—Lyle smiled at the irony of it.

"Lyle?"

"It's funny..... how happy I am. I shirk away from this invention that could very well change the world completely, but at the same time, I can't help but feel thrilled to see it right before my very eyes."

He thought that it was selfish and pathetic.

".....I'm sorry, Maria."

"Lyle?"



"I'm just scared. I'm afraid that I might change someone, or their way of life—I'm afraid, that's why I did not do anything."

It was because he did not do anything, that he had come here. That was how it was.

However, he had wavered in his path many times. And each time, the words from the girl of flaming copper hair beside Lyle had brought him back on track. If he were to respond to her words—if he were to wield his power as she wanted him to, would it do for him to remain thus?

"...I'm sorry Maria. If I do it your way—"

"What I wish for, is what you wish for, Lyle."

Hearing Maria say that rather indifferently, Lyle looked up from the terminal without thinking.

Maria nodded, a satisfied smile on her face.

"I don't know what is it you're worried about—but even though I have some hopes for you, I won't force you to do anything. Well, I've made a few preparations in case you ever feel like it, but... that's just a hobby of mine."

"But still, I..."

"Knowledge and wisdom are a means, not an ends. Indeed, there are many things you can do with them... However, they are also things that only you can do. So if it doesn't match your own wishes, then you can simply ignore it. You're you, after all. There's nothing to be worried about."

With that, Maria winked impishly.

*—Yeah, I see it now.*

His chest felt lightened.

Lyle had always wondered if all Maria cared about was his knowledge and wisdom. Whether she had wanted him to use said knowledge and wisdom like Erllua did.

Lyle had always hesitated. Afraid that he might make a mistake, and end up hurting others. That was why he had always held his talent back. His conscience had always bugged him, why a girl like Maria would ever want to have anything to do with an unmotivated person like him.

However, he did not feel any guilt nor weakness towards her.

"—Feeling distressed, Lyle? I wonder what you're trying to do now?"

Vilhelm was running towards Lyle, who was operating the terminal.

"Lyle, I leave things to you!"

Maria, without holding back, fired her gun.

Vilhelm dodged that as though he had seen it coming. As if he had predicted the trajectory of the bullet.

Without giving Maria any time to load another bullet, Vilhelm slashed at her.

Maria did not run, and furthermore, exchanged blows with him head-on.

"Ugh!"

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Pulling back the bayonet, she sidestepped her foe's attack, and drove the gunstock of the rifle at Vilhelm, in a counter.

The iron plate-reinforced gunstock taking a bit of the skin from his brow, Vilhelm turned his body aside and retreated instantly.

"...I see how it is," said Vilhelm as he touched the blood on his brow with his finger, narrowing his eyes. Your true specialty is in the rifle, eh. That technique is— [*Bayonet Fechten*]<sup>1</sup>, isn't it?"

"Bingo."

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Fechten' is German for 'fencing', so yep, it's bayonet fencing.

Holding the rifle like a spear, Maria smiled fearlessly.

As guns had become a practical and increasingly commonplace weapon, there were those who had adopted the new weapon as a form of martial art, amongst the knights who had lived by the sword. [Bayonet Fechten] was born along the way, polished and continued, as the newest form of close quarters combat.

While checking the condition of his sword, Vilhelm scowled at Maria, who had loaded a round.

".....The maid had some skill, and so does the mistress, it seems. Do let me enjoy myself a little longer!"

With a smile like that of a beast which had found its prey, Vilhelm charged at Maria.

Her dress billowing, Maria took the blow from the magic blade, a desperate expression on her face.

"Lyle! Do it quick!"

"I don't know what you're up to, but— !"

Vilhelm, who had caught Maria's bullet with the flat of his blade, widened his eyes.

The scenery outside the window—the light from the stars was slowly moving. The progress was being taken over.

"You can't be—"

"The rotor's torque was stronger than I expected it to be... three tries, it took..."

"You actually took control of the ship without the conversion key!"

Maria took advantage of his surprise, stabbing out with the bayonet, and Vilhelm dodged it by a paper-thin margin.

"Ridiculous! A back-up is but a back-up! Not to mention, with just a terminal and some numbers—How!?"

"It's just as you said, Margrave Zest. Master was the one who created the Ingenious Engine—But I was the one who came up with the theory and fundamental layout."

Without taking his eyes off the terminal, Lyle replied Vilhelm's question.

"It might be the Ingenious Engine, but it's based on calculations. Even if you use a keyboard that makes it easy to input text, the commands are interpreted through a numerical algorithm. If you understand how that protocol works, even if you key in commands in numerals..."

"Absurd! Even if that were possible—When did you crack the algorithm of the program!"

"The basis for the calculations is a binary number system involving just 1s and 0s. And then, those pipe cylinders that started rotating when you input the program—once I saw the nature of the computation process from that, I understood it at once."

The speed at which Lyle's fingers moved increased, by two, even three times more.

The pipe organ's—the Ingenious Engine's calculation wheels creaked noisily as they rotated. After commands were entered into the algorithm which executed the program, the doors which sealed the passageway leading to the control deck opened.

"Go! Lyle!"

"Got it!"

At Maria's urging, Lyle started to run. However, seeing the figure of the fallen Lunaria, his feet stopped for a moment.

"—Lunaria!"

He had heard the conversation she had with Vilhelm earlier. It explained the recklessness and desperation in her attitude. The girl, whose name had been called out and was looking over at him, her expression had returned to the same empty emotionless one she had in their first meeting.

".....Whether you have any worth or not, I don't really know! Nor is it something I can decide!"

However, he had to refute Lunaria's heart, which had been held captive by her guilt.

"There is just one thing I have to tell you! If you do nothing, then it would mean that you accept Lord Zest's insults! Are you fine with that, deciding just that like, *the worth of your own bloodline!*?"

Saying just that, Lyle turned around.

He did not think that Lunaria's heart would be cleared with just that. However, he wanted to lighten Lunaria's guilt, if only a little, just like how Maria had done for him.

(—Doing that would probably make her keep on fighting... it's hypocrisy.)

As though trying to shake off his self-mockery, Lyle picked up his speed and hurried towards the engine core of <Ymir>.

Part 6

"There he goes....."

Lyle's footsteps could be heard as he departed the area, and Maria took up a stance with her rifle.

"....."

In contrast, Vilhelm was staring blankly at the exit of the deck that Lyle had unlocked. Though he was so full of openings that it seemed like it would all be over if she just aimed and shot him, Maria controlled that temptation, feeling a strange air from him on her bare shoulders and nape.

".....Hu... huhu...Ahahahahaha!"

Vilhelm broke out into uproarious laughter.

"Ha, haha, heheh.....he input the calculations directly? I searched for the conversion key because that had been too complicated—and looking at the rotations of the wheels? He cracked the program from looking at all those numbers rotating at that kind of speed? How good must your memory and mental calculation be to do that? My worries as to whether he was a true prodigy were all for naught! He's a monster. With his vast amount of knowledge and his exceptional ability to do mental calculations, he's a monster of intellect! Magnificent! I must have him on my side, no matter what."

Maria felt the chills run down her spine.

There was nothing resembling malice in Vilhelm's voice. It felt like that of a positive, eloquent, pleasant young man.

However, the meaning behind those words, revealed nothing but a disregard for the other party's will, and only a desire to enforce his own.

Vilhelm returned to the base of the Ingenious Engine and tapped the keyboard. With a clanging sound, the metal cover was disconnected.

"I've opened up the voice pipe in the warship. Anything that happens in this control deck will be heard throughout the entire ship."

No one knew that such a thing existed, until he had said it.

"Lyle! I don't know how you're going to destroy the engine core without any explosives, but... get back here at once!"

The Margrave called out to Lyle, who was running in the warship.

"I hope you will think this through quickly! I do not wish to make the ladies scream—if <Dainsleif> was to absorb their blood, it will all come to the same ending anyway!"

Vilhelm approached quietly, as though he was a shadow. The magic sword was drawing closer, aimed towards Maria.

Spinning about using the rifle like a spear, Maria grit her teeth and defended herself against the fierce assault from the magic blade.

If she suffered so much as a graze, she would be controlled. It was necessary for her to push her concentration to the utmost limit.

"Damn!"

"Bayonet Fechten is a highly offensive combat style which lacks in defence. You won't make any progress if you're only defending, will you?"

He was explaining it to Lyle, and at the same time, provoking Maria directly.

The bayonet was used similar to a spear, but it relied heavily on defeating the enemy in a single strike. It was unavoidable that there would be an opening for a counterattack. And that was what Vilhelm had been going for.

"Don't worry. I will not treat you coldly. I did say that I will grant you your wish, after all."

"I have no idea what you're going on about!"

"I'm just saying, if you won't be obedient, then I'll make you be."

Instead of defending with the sword, he went on the attack with words.

"I'll even let you bed Lyle. It'd be rather simple to remove all sense of shame from you."

"Wha—"

"I'll engrave the ways of pleasuring a man right onto your heart. Don't you think that would make Lyle feel so good that he'd float right up to heaven?"

"You disgusting beast!"

Maria found herself enraged, at those words which had trampled all over her feelings for Lyle.

Rage disrupted concentration. Maria, who was concentrating on the magic sword, widened her eyes when she saw that Vilhelm had let go of the hilt. In that instant, a sharp elbow drove into her body, and her body formed the shape of a 'c'.

He nimbly grabbed hold of the magic sword in mid-air, and swung it down on Maria, who was enduring the pain.

"Oh no— !"

However, the blade of the magic sword passed through the air before her eyes, a distance away. Vilhelm also seemed to be a distance away.

Not quite understanding what had happened, Maria realised that she had been carried away, the [Fog] entwined around her body, and then she was placed down next to Lunaria, who was unsteadily rising to her feet.

".....A hateful man he is."

Lunaria sighingly said.

".....Yes, I am but a powerless, worthless and insignificant lass. I have not the intention of changing that fact... I understand that, yet you..... !"

Maria blinked with surprise, and looked down at Lunaria's pale silver hair.



The one she seemed to be angry at was not Vilhelm, but Lyle, it seemed. Her irritated face seemed to have several kinds of colourful languages written on it, but the shadow of pessimism seemed to have been chased away.

"All of it... I understood..... yet you..... !"

"—Lyle is just that kind of guy."

Lunaria looked up at her, and Maria smiled wryly in response, as though she were both proud and amazed.

"For example, he'd even save someone who's trying to commit suicide before him, right? But, he won't tell that person to cherish their life. He'd probably just go, 'I dislike seeing this sort of thing happen'. And so, he would stop them from suicide. No matter how many times, he would save them... and he would continue to do so until they give up on trying to do so."

".....I think I kind of understand."

Lunaria looked sullen as she quietened down, but she nodded as though of the same opinion.

She felt that Maria was a surprisingly easy girl to understand, and she could feel a sense of familiarity from her. Their hearts were being thrown into disarray by the same young man, and it was similar to the feeling of 'camaraderie'.

"You saved me earlier. I'll have to thank you once this is all over. What would you like?"

".....Then, would you please tell me your 'secret'?"

Maria raised her eyebrows, but quickly nodded after remembering their exchange back in Lyle's laboratory.

"Yeah, that's fine by me. Well then, let's get started, shall we, *Lunaria*?"

"Let us do so, *Maria*."

The copper and pale silver hair, as though being repelled from each other, abruptly jumped aside. Immediately after, the faint crimson-coloured magic sword came slashing down.

"—You think by joining forces you'd stand a chance?"

Vilhelm went after Maria, who was on his right. Maria fired a shot, to suppress him. Naturally, Vilhelm evaded that shot. In the same motion, he thrust his sword right at Maria,

"Ugh—"

The high-density [Fog] had guarded Maria from the magic blade.

Lunaria then took the place of Maria who had retreated, after being protected by the [Fog].

And once again, Vilhelm attacked Lunaria, who had come at him riding upon the [Fog], with both his magic and verbal sword.

"You're still at it? What are you still fighting for? You, who had left your brethren behind, and failed to die—"

"It is just as you say. I will fail to die."

Lunaria looked back at Vilhelm resolutely, wielding the [Fog].

"What will come of your anger? You, the powerless you, who could do naught but flee from even your own cowardice, what will come of fighting now?"

"Nothing will come of it. My feelings still have not changed, that I am worthless, and that this world would be better off without me. I am but a coward who ran away..... However, those of the Fog—I cannot forgive any insults you make to their name!"

".....Tch."

Vilhelm murmured, realising that he would not seize the advantage this time.

Lunaria's nihilistic ways were a result of her inability to save her brethren. She could not forgive her own powerlessness, and that was why she had thought herself a 'corpse that ought to disappear', 'someone who found no worth in living, a person who failed to die'.

Her sense of powerlessness was now reversed, due to her love for her family.

".....Then, the only thing left is to cut you down."

Vilhelm spun about, the momentum adding into the heavy blow he unleashed. The [Fog], which had increased magical density, gave in to Vilhelm's slash.

Lunaria took up a defensive stance with her broken sword.

"What can you possibly do with that broken blade!"

However, the magic blade that sought to split apart that delicate neck, was clearly repelled away.

Vilhelm's eyes widened.

"That's..."

A vortex of the phantasmal [Fog] was swirling around the tip of Lunaria's hand. The [Fog] coiled around the broken sword, as though taking the place of the sword's blade, forming a white, semi-transparent blade like that of frosted glass.

"—This is the <*Nebula Sparda*><sup>1</sup>."

With a swaying dance, Lunaria threw out a horizontal slash with the blade of [Fog].

The magic blade parried. The convergence rate of the [Fog]'s density was stretched to its utmost limits, and it was nothing like what had been seen so far. And so, Vilhelm put in even more strength into his blows.

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<sup>1</sup> The kanji meaning of *Nebula Sparda* is 'The Sword of Fog'

The <Nebula Sparda> was severed in the middle, but the blade of [Fog] reformed immediately, slicing at Vilhelm.

"What!?"

He dodged, but the blade of [Fog] grazed his well-featured face, wounding his cheek.

Lunaria concentrated all of the [Fog] that her body was emitting into the <Nebula Sparda>. No matter how many times it was destroyed, it would reform itself—it was, so to speak, *a sword which cannot be blocked*. And like its namesake, it slipped through defences and attacked, like fog.

However, there was a price to pay for overexertion of this power. The consumption rate of power was in a different league from when Lunaria was clad in [Fog], and each time the <Nebula Sparda> was broken and reformed itself, her face grew paler.

"Why you— !"

It threw away all thoughts of defence, and risked the user's life—Vilhelm, who had thought that, promptly jumped back. Sparks erupted from the ground near his feet, from the impact of a projectile.

"Don't forget that I'm here as well!"

Maria called out, loading a round into the rifle.

Lunaria, who had resistance against <Dainsleif>, was the vanguard and defence, and Maria, who was skilled with the gun, offered suppressive fire and offence. It was an unexpected, yet natural combination.

".....Still, these are merely parlour tricks, little ladies."

A faint trace of irritation flickering over his face, Vilhelm charged right at the two of them.



### Part 7

Lyle was sprinting through the interior of <Ymir>. The battle situation in the control deck was being broadcasted to the entire ship since a while ago, but he believed in Maria and Lunaria, and quickened his pace.

The location of the Amber Reactor, the engine core, he had learnt from the map of the warship briefly flashed across his mind. The steady increase in the number of thick, heavy doors and the thickening of the pipes substantiated the fact that he was on the right track.

".....It's here."

He finally arrived at a conspicuous massive steel door. Rotating valves opened up, and Lyle could feel the hot, dusk-coloured air on his cheeks.

An object formed of thirty-two pentagons and hexagons, interlaced together. That was the rough shape of the Amber Reactor. The interior was cast in steel, and there a special alloy called 'mithril' was deposited, which served to amplify the efficiency of the energy contained in the amber.

The diameter of the Amber Reactor, which was half-buried in pipes and its furnace, was longer than the length of a large adult; it was solidly and firmly built. If he were to open the hexagonal grate which replenished the amber, there would be a fair amount of heat outflow, but he would not do something that deliberate.

".....Should I use this?"

Lyle took out the weapon he had secretly prepared beforehand.

It was a single-shot revolver that fired explosive rounds. The calibre was high, but it was not powerful enough to destroy the steel Amber Reactor—normally, that is.

The trick was in the bullet.

Into the top-break revolver, a silver bullet that reflected with a rainbow-coloured light was loaded.

Going back into the passageway to put some distance inbetween, he held the gun with both hands, and pointed it at the Amber Reactor.

Placing his finger on the trigger—and Lyle hesitated then.

Was it fine to just destroy <Ymir>—the Ingenious Engine?

Was it fine to just destroy this unprecedented invention, an Ingenious Engine that was actually in operation, just like this?

His resolve to pull the trigger there and then, would not change.

His determination to not pull the trigger, would change.

The answer to the question that Erllua had once asked him, was now right at his fingertips.

*I'll—*

The finger on the trigger began to tremble.

Right at that moment, a voice sounded out from the walls.

*"—Enough!"*

He heard a voice, loud enough to chase away all his hesitation.



### Part 8

The fight in the control deck was like a seesaw; the tides turning favourable one moment, and unfavourable the next, for both parties. It was a precarious equilibrium. Lunaria's <Nebula Sparda> certainly was powerful, but her skill with the sword was beneath Vilhelm's. No matter how fast her attacks, they were all predicted and deflected.

None of Maria's shots had hit thus far; the moment she pulled the trigger, he was already somewhere else. It went without saying that none of the attacks from her bayonet struck home either.

With their hasty cooperation, Maria and Lunaria could barely manage to keep at bay Vilhelm, who was displaying his superhuman skill with the sword. They were unused to fighting side-by-side with each other, and they were slowly getting worn out.

".....Sheesh. I wish he'd go a little easier on us."

Maria lamented, as she tried to regulate her breathing.

Vilhelm stood before them, looking rather relaxed. He did not even break a sweat even though both his opponents possessed uncommon fighting strength.

"It's about time you ran out of bullets, isn't it? The «Nosferatu» lady over there looks pretty tired as well."

"....."

Lunaria was silent. She was barely hanging on, trying to catch her breath. The <Nebula Sparda> was materialised with her magical power. And to the Phantasms, magical power was their life force. Each time she crossed blades with Vilhelm's magic sword, a portion of her life was literally shaved away.

"Won't you stop this already? To begin with, this has been a rather pointless conflict."

Said Vilhelm.



"I could even give <Dainsleif> back to the lady there. There are many other ways of manipulating people. Miss Maria, I'm sure you understand the worth of the Ingenious Engine, don't you? Not announcing it to the world is simply preposterous.

So how about it? Won't you both persuade Lyle for me?"

"....." "....."

Maria and Lunaria looked at each other in silence.

And their only response was to take up a stance with their respective weapons, and simultaneously leaping at him.

Vilhelm leaked out a small sigh.

".....Hah. Really now....."

While looking at the <Nebula Sparda> Lunaria had unleashed,

"What will come of fulfilling your duty to your already departed brethren? Those of the Fog could not adapt to the times and were thus weeded out, and you, as one of them, should just disappear silently, just like them."

"That should have been the case."

Taking both Vilhelm's magic blade and words head-on, Lunaria quietly said.

"There is neither meaning nor worth in my present self—I know that very well."

"If you do, then what are you fighting for? I fail to understand."

As though he was swatting a fly, Vilhelm swung his blade.

Her stance destroyed by a light blow from his sword, the faint crimson-coloured blade once again swung downwards at her. However, the bayonet thrust forward from the side prevented that.

"—And speaking of failure to understand, the same goes for you as well, Maria Highline."

Said Vilhelm, repelling the bayonet that was thrust out like a spear.

"Did not you wish for Lyle to be the standard-bearer for a new revolution? This was a good opportunity to fulfill that wish. Yet you chose to postpone—no, how could you waste that chance?"

"—Enough! You cretinous fool!"

Using the rifle as a shield to defend against the magic blade, Maria grit her teeth and shouted out loud.

"Stop saying that already! You don't know anything about me!"

"I do. You have the backing of the Highline Foundation, a talent for business, high physical capabilities, and a beautiful body. You also take advantage of your social status as a woman. There is worth in your abilities. You have both worth and the ability to utilise Lyle Waldstein's talent to the fullest—"

"Hell if I know anything about worth! My worth is for me to decide! The same goes for the way I choose to live my life. Stop wasting our time!"

"Talent is a treasure that should be used correctly. It could direct you, yet it could also control you. Which is why, you need someone who can appraise worth to manage your talent. If you refuse to do that—then I will be the one to manage Lyle."

"There's no damn way I'll let you, is there!"

Maria pulled the trigger, firing the bullet at point-blank range, in rage.

Although he had dodged it, the roar of the gunfire caused Vilhelm to grimace.

Maria pressed the attack.

"Do not speak of it lightly, Vilhelm Zest! Do not judge Lyle with your sense of value! You have not a single clue of his worth!"

".....That's interesting to hear. Does he have something that surpasses the Ingenious Engine that is moving this flying warship? If so, what is it— ?"

"You just don't get it at all, do you?"

Maria smiled, feeling pity for Vilhelm, from the bottom of her heart.

"It's his 'kindness' for sure, isn't it!"

".....Hmph. Merely a woman's jest... I cannot leave him to you, it seems!"

As though it were a counter, Vilhelm thrust his fist at Maria.

As her concentration was focused upon the magic sword, Maria leaked out a groan as her body bent from the impact.

"I'll be the one to make full use of Lyle Waldstein's talent!"

"Hell no—a man who speaks of nothing but talent should not even speak of Lyle's name!"

"Just what you'd expect a woman to say!"

"Cause I am one after all!"

She was still somehow guarding with her rifle, but as she was lacking in strength, it was easily knocked aside.

And at the now defenceless Maria's neck, the magic blade was thrust out, to draw her blood.

"Maria!"

Though Lunaria had jumped in to block the attack, it took all of her might to stop that one attack, due to her exhaustion.

The girls collapsed onto the ground of the deck, as though in a pile.

"It's over now."

Vilhelm raised the magic blade overhead—it was at that moment,

"!"

"Kyaah!"

The ground, the flying fortress trembled greatly, and a heavy sound rang out a moment later.

A small rumble, and then a gigantic booming sound could be heard.

With perfect timing, the ground beneath their feet began to tremble, throwing Vilhelm off his stance. He who was about to unleash an attack with all his power behind it, was now exposed with a big, almost fatal opening.

"Eat this, you oaf!"

Maria did not seize the opportunity to run, but pulled the trigger of her rifle.

The spinning bullet, a result of rifling in her gun, shaved off a portion of Vilhelm's brow.

"Ngh—ugh!?"

Vilhelm threw himself backwards with all his might. Enduring the pain from his brow, where blood was now flowing profusely, Vilhelm threw the girls a sidelong glance.

The machinery had stopped, and the flying warship was now moving slowly due to inertia. What can be seen of the outside was no grassy plains, but a water surface which reflected the light from the stars.

".....Lake Holle, huh."

It was the water source for the royal capital, located to its northwest. It measured over five kilometres at its widest, and over two hundred metres at its deepest. The ideal place to sink a secret.

It seemed that this had been the goal all along. That youth had already planned where to dispose of <Ymir> from the beginning.

"He had accurately predicted the time when the ship would arrive at this location and timed the destruction of the Amber Reactor—the surprises simply keep coming..."

The calculation wheels of the Ingenious Engine started to slow down in its rotation, along with the weakening of the steam pressure. What remained was to release the helium from the envelope, and the flying warship covered with steel armour would sink into the lake.

<Ymir> was supposedly doomed, but Vilhelm was not yet perturbed by the turn of events.

Indeed, although he had not expected the Amber Reactor to be destroyed without any heavy-duty equipment, neither had he thought that Lyle Waldstein would run away on his own. Vilhelm had been certain that he would come and save the girls.

Vilhelm turned his bloody face towards the girls who were out of breath and getting up.

"Let us go at it again—and settle this once and for all!"

Closing in on them, Vilhelm let out a chain of attacks one after another.

The magical blade came at Maria and Lunaria, keenly cutting through the air. In the span of a breath, the two of them were one-sidedly kept on the defence.

"Though there were unforeseen circumstances, the ending remains the same."

Vilhelm Zest, who had decided thus, was someone who had achieved everything. Martial arts, etiquette, status, personal connections.

Of course, he was not talented at every single aspect. However, everything he had achieved was due to the herculean amount of effort he had spent and his spirit of perseverance.

"This time is no exception—I will acquire what I want."

"—For what?"

A voice resounded in the deck.

*"For what do you go that far seeking power?"*

What came from the voice pipe was undoubtedly Lyle's voice.

"Haven't I already said it!"

Glaring at the girls who were desperately fending off the magic blade, Vilhelm shouted his reply.

"This is for my 'own worth'! I will acquire it, and continue to rise!"

*"Then, how far will you go?"*

"—What?"

*"How far will you go before you are satisfied, Margrave Vilhelm Zest?"*

As though his weak point had been struck, Vilhelm sank into silence.

Maria and Lunaria then shifted into the counteroffensive, taking advantage of the opening that was created, due to his sword being slower by a few moments.

Vilhelm exhaled, and concentrated on the battle.

"Hrmph..."

*"Please tell me. How far will you go?"*

"...What underhanded methods. Are you trying to distract me with idle banter?"

*"If that's what you think... ha, then you can simply cover your ears."*

He was most likely sprinting through the passageway and shouting into the handy voice pipes that were located throughout the path in intervals. Haggard breathing was mixed in with his voice.

*"If you think that it is distracting..... then, is there a reason why you must not be distracted?"*

However, during the breaks when he had caught his breath, his questions came, merciless and relentless.

*"In the first place... has there ever been anything that you had wished for and obtained?"*

"What?"

The <Nebula Sparda> grazed Vilhelm's chest lightly, as he was confused by the question.

Whether it had been pain or bewilderment, Vilhelm's face was distorted, perhaps at both parties he was facing.

"—I have always been training myself. A single-minded will I possess, and so I shall obtain power!"

*"A hardworking one, aren't you."*

It had a hint of sarcasm behind it.

*"Still, is that really what you wish for?"*

"Hmph!"

Evading the bayonet aiming for his temple, Vilhelm shouted.

"I will prove it to you right here!"

*"Really?"*

Lyle continued.

*"The 'resoluteness of will' is different from the 'strength of feelings'. There will be no 'end' for you. Would that not mean that there was no 'beginning' in the first place?"*

"Hmph..."

*"All you've said is simply what you ought to do... None of it had been what you wanted to do."*

"Ngh....."

It was before anyone had realised it, that Vilhelm had uttered a groan.

Maria's gun, Lunaria's Fog, none of those were things that Vilhelm ought to have been afraid of. They were things he could deal with.

"Urgh...?"

Vilhelm Zest had obtained everything.

The title of Margrave. At some point in time, he realised that he could make use of the position better than others could. Which was why he had caused his father's death in a way that could not be perceived as anything other than an accident, and succeeded the title of Margrave.

However, if the Margrave were to be asked what he had wanted—

"Ugh..."

*"Your ambition and self-denial are things that are difficult for me to respect, Vilhelm Zest."*

It was the first time Lyle had called him by name.

*"However, as regrettable as it is, no matter how many things you obtain with your iron will, you will never be satisfied. No matter how much worth you accumulate—you still lack 'ambition'."*

"Urgh....."



"...The tables have turned."

Lunaria murmured.

"How fare you against the verbal blade?"

"Do not be carried away, you relic of the olden age!"

Vilhelm's eyes promptly snapped open as he delivered a slash at Lunaria. However, the magic blade was stopped by the blade of Fog.

"...Your blade has become dull."

Said Lunaria, as the shape of her <Nebula Sparda> wavered, entwining itself around the magic sword.

"Ngh..."

"You finally look desperate, my good Margrave."

And over Lunaria's head, Maria's rifle was thrust out.

"I apologise, for the slap this time!"

That attack was dodged, but the bullet fired scraped off a bit of his right cheek. His cheek was torn open, revealing his teethridge.

"Gah—Ooooooooooh!"

With all his might, he slashed at them.

The girls were also reaching their limit and were staggering. Maria loaded her last bullet, Lunaria's Eyes of Amber flared up, and they jointly attacked Vilhelm at once.

"...They are damnably persistent..."

Vilhelm grit his teeth, which were now exposed on one side of his face.

—*Why do these girls not yield?*

—*Why have they given me so much difficulty?*

—*Why am I—*

"Grr, grrgh...."

*"A person's worth is something that he creates himself. A person's meaning in life is something that he decides himself. Even if others think you worthless."*

"I-I..."

*"You had said that you do not understand your own worth. That, is also an example. It is not that you do not understand. It's just that you do not have any."*

The tables had truly been turned, at some point.

All of the combat theories he had, all of the martial arts he had trained in, had become fuzzy in his mind. His face stiff, Vilhelm desperately fought, swinging his blade.

"And... what are you trying to say!"

Vilhelm shouted, as though he was throwing up blood.

"What exactly do you want! What is it that you live for! You, who have thrown aside your own worth readily, what on earth is it that drives you forward!"

His composure and elegance all but gone, Vilhelm Zest roared.

"Answer me, Lyle Waldstein!"

*"—What it is, is something very obvious. So obvious, you might even laugh at the idea of it."*

In the midst of the sounds of an intense battle, Lyle's voice was frighteningly clear.

*"I just—want to be someone who can treat others kindly."*

".....The hell.....?"

A shocked voice escaped from Vilhelm, as though he had forgotten what sort of situation he was in.

"That's it? Just for that...?"

Lyle's answer sounded like a cliché phrase that a parent would tell their children.

—But, how many people were there that truly put such an obvious thing into practice?

Vilhelm finally realised that he had made a misunderstanding.

He had thought that Lyle Waldstein had an attitude that was ill-suited to his talent. He had an extraordinary intellect, but he was otherwise ordinary, in terms of sensibility. Therefore, he thought that Lyle would be unable to bring his talent out to the fullest.

He was wrong.

It was because he was ordinary otherwise, that his talent had all but consumed him. The impression he gave off was something that could not be compared to the average person; it was supported by a powerful ego.

"W-What is this..."

And that ego dealt the finishing blow.

Vilhelm felt a sudden chill overcome him. His hand which held his sword began to tremble.

He had no worries, nothing of the like, up until now. He had thought that what he did was the obvious thing to do. That was why he rose and rose, brimming with confidence.

What he was feeling then, was the coldness of losing his pillar of support.

It was obvious—but what did 'obvious' mean?

By the time Vilhelm, literally dumbfounded, had realised it, the victor had already been decided. A bullet struck him in the left shoulder, his body bent from the impact, and his right arm which held the sword was severed at the wrist.

Blood spurting, his tempered body fell through the air.

"Grugh....."

With a small thump, Vilhelm pitched forward and collapsed.

His blood spread out on the ground, like a puddle of water.

".....We did it..."

Maria exhaled her breath. She was supporting herself using her rifle as a walking stick.

The light from her Eyes of Amber fading, the blade of Lunaria's <Nebula Sparda> dispersed.

The only sounds that could be heard in the control deck of the flying warship were their ragged breathing.

"Seriously... he was such a monstrous foe."

"Yeah..... if not for Master Lyle's words, we would never have won."

Maria and Lunaria looked at each other, and smiled.

"Well then..... when Lyle comes back— !"

"Maria!?"

Lunaria cried out, seeing that Maria had been sent flying away suddenly.

".....You sure did a number on me, little girls..."

His entire body bloodied, Vilhelm's face was distorted, like a demon, as he rose from the ground. At that ominous sight, a scream rose up in Lunaria's throat. His unharmed left hand then tightly grabbed her by the neck.

"Gah, ha—"

Vilhelm dragged Lunaria over to Maria, who was trying to stand up, and kicked her in the neck with the sole of his boots.

"Ga—"

"Don't screw around..... with me...!"

His voice leaked out from his torn right cheek, and Vilhelm exerted more strength at the girls. Both Maria and Lunaria's faces grew paler. From their anguished throats, the vestiges of a scream could be heard.

"—Vilhelm Zest!"

It was the natural voice of someone this time.

It was Lyle Waldstein. His face stained with soot and dust, he was glaring intensely at Vilhelm Zest.

Part 9

Having destroyed the engine parts, Lyle blew into the voice pipe that had caught his eye, running through the passageway leading to the control deck.

"That which exists at the end of light, the end of darkness. That which denotes the origin of wind, the origin of fire—"

While sprinting, Lyle chanted the <Oracio>. There was no amber in his hands. But what was there in its place, was the high-calibre revolver.

"Of forgotten dusk, of heretic gold, that which is the cradle of time. Embrace the distant lands with thy gentleness, and in thy kindness, grant us forgiveness—"

He finally reached the control deck, and so the final curtains were about to fall.

Vilhelm, covered in wounds, was about to kill both the girls.

"Vilhelm Zest!"

".....Ah, it's you, Lyle."

His face looked wild as he faced Lyle; almost like he was someone else.

".....You've surprised me. These girls weren't the ones who drove me into a corner... it was you. Your worthless little speech."

Said Vilhelm, in a hollow voice.

"It was the first time anyone has ever told me that... still, it's strange, isn't it? Why did no one ever try to?"

".....That's because you're overtly positive."

Lyle narrowed his eyes, as though in pity.

"You're different from me. I've always been at a standstill... you have a will which pulls people along with you. It's just that—there's no 'end' in that will of yours."

"Yeah, I see... I did not have a starting point. I only moved, according to what was required of me... But somehow, I just feel something seething well up inside me when I hear you say that. Like you've reached something in the depths of my heart."

Vilhelm looked back at Lyle with a light in his eyes.

"The world ought to thank you, I suppose. If not for your prideful kindness, the world would have been changed! Your 'power' is far larger than I had given it credit for... and I wanted that! And that is the only truth that is left for me! Even if the means I choose have no purpose...!"

"....."

"Well then, I give you a choice..... will you join forces with me and change the world, or will you reject my offer, leave the world as it is and lose everything!"

Indicating the girls who were struggling to breathe, a demonic expression flickered across Vilhelm's face.

"Even now, I still hold their lives in my hands. Now, what will you choose!?"

".....This will be my reply."

Lyle quietly raised the revolver in his hands.

"Are you sure about that? You might end up shooting them with your own hands, won't you? I doubt that it would be the right decision."

"There is only one thing that will always be right, to me."

Saying that, Lyle smiled.

Lyle slowly aligned the revolver horizontally.

Vilhelm noticed that, and his eyes widened suddenly.

"Stop... do you even understand what kind of mistake you are about to make!"

"Yeah. I'm taking responsibility for what I have created... that much is obvious."

And into the revolver Lyle held in his hands, he breathed the last verse of the <Oracio>.

"—Thou art the tremors in the boundary; Surpass logic, and overcome time! And thus, bring unto us a dusk of eternity!"

The bullet loaded into the gun in Lyle's hand—the high-calibre, single-shot revolver, was no ordinary bullet.

It was of special-make; a mithril bullet. And within it, amber was sealed.

The amber, which normally reached its critical transition state with the aid of various external machinery or tools through an increase in heat or pressure, would be rapidly excited by the magus, Lyle.

The inside of the mithril bullet acted like a miniature Amber Reactor; the magical power of the amber was being converted by the heat.

A product of magic and science—the fusion of both art and technology together, that was the <Frei Kugel><sup>1</sup>, which only Lyle could produce and control. This was also what had destroyed the gigantic Amber Reactor in <Ymir>'s engine core.

Lyle pointed the <Frei Kugel> at the Ingenious Engine.

"Sto—"

Ignoring Vilhelm who was trying to stop him, he pulled the trigger.

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<sup>1</sup> Frei Kugel; Frei = 'free', Kugel = 'bullet', you can put two and two together. The kanji, on the other hand, means 'magic bullet'.





The amber bullet that was fired cut through the air in a natural parabola. It passed by Vilhelm's side, and straight behind him—right into the Ingenious Engine.

Upon hitting its target, the deftly crafted amber bullet compressed the miniature Amber Reactor inside it. The amber which was in a stable state, converted all of the energy contained within it into heat.

And along with the heat came the sudden expansion of air, creating a shockwave.

The whirling destruction melted the cylinders, smashed the keyboard, and sent countless numbers of gears flying. The pipe organ-like Ingenious Engine, was reduced to scrap in a single moment.

"O, ooh..."

Releasing Maria and Lunaria, Vilhelm turned around and faced the destroyed Ingenious Engine. With unsteady steps, he walked towards the smoking wreckage.

"O-oh... Why did, why did it come to this....."

Vilhelm was devastated by the 'answer', which was expressed with far more impact than eloquent words.

The first thing that he had wished for and gotten—was in no way what Lyle had, that was what the destroyed Ingenious Engine seemed to say.

It was Vilhelm Zest's first experience of 'despair'.

His advantage of holding Maria's and Lunaria's lives in his hands—was all but gone.

".....Can you stand, Maria, Lunaria?"

Lyle called out to the two of them, and they firmly got up, with their own two feet.

"Yeah, 'tis but a scratch."

Said Maria, smiling.

As though to make him feel at ease, Lunaria nodded with that expressionless face of hers.

Lyle felt relieved.

*"—Lyle."*

A certain familiar voice resounded, and Lyle looked up, taken by surprise.

*"—Most likely, you're the one who's going to be listening to this."*

The nostalgic voice of his master—the voice of Erllua Azoth resounded forth.

Part 10

"Lyle, what's..."

Though Maria was acquainted with Erllua, her voice still sounded perplexed, after hearing the voice that had suddenly rang out.

Lyle was also overcome with surprise, and guessed at the identity of the voice.

It was likely that a gramophone—or some sort of device which could record sound had been set up. Through the voice pipes in the warship, the nostalgic voice of his master called out to Lyle.

*"—My voice has been set to broadcast upon the destruction of the Ingenious Engine. Someone who would think of destroying such an invention and actually carry it out, would probably be a person like you."*

*Isn't that so,* asked the Erllua who drifted through his mind, with an innocent smile.

*"You must have been worried. About destroying the Ingenious Engine, the fruit of your labour. Still, that's fine. This thing would probably bring more harm to the world than good."*

*If that's the case, why did you create it?* As he longed to ask that question,

*"If that's the case, why did I create it, is what you're most likely thinking. Well, it's sort of like a job to me. If there's something interesting, I'd want to try and make it real. Without that, I wouldn't be myself. It's in the nature of a scientist, after all."*

Even her self-deprecating sigh had been precisely reproduced. Erllua's voice continued,

*".....And as I remained pondering, I created many a different thing, but not once had I thought of whether it was for good or for bad, or whether people would like it or not. How many people would die then, because of what I had invented? I can honestly say that I had not a single clue. Well, most people*

*wouldn't have. Still—that puts us on the level of beasts. In the end, we would merely be slaves to our desires."*

*"....."*

*"I thought that you would feel the same... but it seems I was wrong. Somehow, you're still the same old softhearted person as always."*

From her voice, it seemed as though she were smiling wryly, saying, *'What a hopeless guy'*. Lyle too, made a wry smile.

*"—Lyle. Is your wish still, 'I want to live to give kindness to others'? Because that is a thorny path you seek to tread, wanting to be a beast with reason, in a world of humans, filled with imperfection. That's why Lyle, you have to be prepared to be hurt, at times."*

*"....."*

*"I won't tell you not to think too much about it. You're way smarter than other people, when all's said and done. That's why, think, and think further about it, with all your might. Continue to be lost in your thoughts. —That's your forte after all, right?"*

Her voice was laughing cheerily.

*".....It may be fun to just go along with the talent you have been blessed with, but the road that seems to be the most fun, is one that cannot be backtracked out of. Well—give it your best shot."*

It was quite the irresponsible farewell; all that remained was noise like that of blowing wind.

*".....She still loves messing around with her disciple as much as always, eh,"* said Maria.

She believed that Lyle would be the first one to stop <Ymir>, if it was ever activated. That her disciple would stop the person who would use it for his own, for her. She left it to him, and because she truly believed her disciple would be the one to do so, she had left that voice recording.

".....If I'm the softhearted person, then you are the troublemaker, Master."

"Would the disciple not take after the master, in that case?"

Lunaria, who was holding <Dainsleif>, which she had picked up from the ground, had said that while standing next to Lyle.

"...A troublemaker, am I.....?"

"The fact that you don't realise it is proof enough."

Maria added, with a smile.

As though to ridicule him, Lunaria narrowed her eyes.

Lyle fell into silence at their reactions, discouraged.

*"—Ah, before I forget, this tape will be destroyed automatically, along with the flying warship."*

The trio froze in place, at the sound of the voice that they had thought was in their mind.

*"And before you get caught up in the ensuing destruction, evacuate as quickly as possible. That's about all I need to say, I'm out."*

"Wait a—"

As if to block out any complaints, the sound was abruptly cut off.

".....Well, it does save me some trouble."

"What're you being all calm for!"

Maria shouted.

At the large hole on the other side of the control deck, they saw that the black water surface was steadily drawing closer. They were losing altitude.

"I-I cannot swim...!"

Lunaria's face stiffened in horror.

"W-We have to escape— !"

"Ah, yeah. We have to hurry...!"

Lyle looked towards the wreckage of the Ingenious Engine.

"Gr... Kgh..... Damn, for it to end like this..... damn it!"

The young man who inherited the title of Margrave, was holding his sides with laughter.

"Indeed! My plans had gone thus awry—it's the first time I've ever suffered a defeat like this! Ha... haha..... Hahahahahahahahaha!"

The blood from the gunshot wound on his left shoulder and his severed right wrist, had stained the deck in a bloody red. As though to wring out even more of his own blood, Vilhelm continued to laugh.

".....Your bleeding will stop soon. Let's escape this place together."

"Haha! Kind, aren't you..... irritatingly so."

Vilhelm got up unsteadily on his feet, but he stepped backwards—towards the hole in the deck.

"Kindness and pride are two sides of the same coin... have you noticed that? If you do not seek compensation for your kindness, then what is it, but pride?"

"....."

"That kindness can only ever be poison to someone the likes of me. If I accept your kindness, then it would mean my acknowledgement of the fact that I am but a drop in the ocean..... And that, I cannot do. Because that is surely....."

"Sto—"

Lyle was about to dash forward, but he was stopped by Maria and Lunaria.

Looking content, Vilhelm arrived at the gigantic hole.

"I give you my thanks, dear ladies... Lyle Waldstein. This is my ending point."

Vilhelm said, seemingly satisfied.

"However, you will not end here! More and more people will gather around you, from now! You are the true <Erbe Der Last Hexe>! Just regret the fact that you never became mine, someday!"

Laughing boisterously, Vilhelm Zest jumped off the deck.

Swallowed by the darkness, was his quickly disappearing figure.

".....Lyle?"

"Master Lyle...?"

".....Don't worry. It'll be alright, Maria, Lunaria."

Tapping the hands of the girls who were restraining him, Lyle smiled, in order to put them at ease.

"...Let's go."

Nudging the two of them, Lyle turned his back once and for all, to the destroyed Ingenious Engine.



## Epilogue – The Youth and the Maiden

### Part 0

In a brand-new residential area in the royal capital, a conspicuous, new apartment building was being built. From the outside, it looked clean and gave off a sportive feel; people would expect it to be property for the rich and wealthy.

And on the top floor of the high-class apartment,

"Uu, uuuuuuu..... Lylee~~"

A lone girl was digging her nails into the door.

Needless to say, she was Maria Highline.

She was bandaged in some places of her body like the nape of her neck, but it was somewhat like seeing cats and dogs being chased outside; not a single fragment of sympathy could be felt for her.

".....What are you doing, Milady?"

Milla, carrying a wash basin with ice in it, sighed at her mistress' unladylike appearance.

"M-Milla! Is he alright? Is Lyle alright? He didn't die, did he!?"

".....Hmm, I wouldn't know about that."

Milla's expression was mournful, and Maria was greatly troubled.

"AAH! Lyleeeeeeeee! Milla! Is there nothing I can do!?"

"Well..... how about bringing the research papers that have been piled up in Master Lyle's laboratory? If you do that, Master Lyle's mood might also—"

"Research documents! I'll go get them right away!"

No sooner then she had said that, Maria ran off like the wind.

".....Dear me. We've finally gotten some peace."

Milla, who had tactfully chased off Maria, opened the door.

A luxurious and calming guest room. On top of the bed was,

"Ugh, urgh..... ah, a fever..... my whole body hurts too....."

A feverish groan echoed in the room gloomily.

Lyle was covered in quilts and blankets up to his neck, with ice bags placed on his head.

With the Ingenious Engine destroyed, every engine part ceasing to function, the gas in the envelope being released, the flying warship <Ymir> had sank right into the deepest depths of Lake Holle.

Three days have passed since their escape from that flying warship, and now Lyle was down with a fever.

Swimming in the lake during the start of spring was not overly unreasonable, but if the fact that he was in a sinking warship, the prospect of being sunk along with it might have caused some mental damage..... that was what Lyle thought.

"Still, you could look at it as an honourable wound. You swam through Lake Holle, carrying two ladies with you, after all."

"Ugh..... I didn't expect both Maria and Lunaria to be like stones in the water....."

Lyle's sneezes mingled with his groans.

"Yes, you've done well."

Milla smiled as she changed Lyle's ice pack. What Lyle had done seemed to be rather fun.

While gallantly nursing him, Milla then said to Lyle.

"I heard about the battle from my mistress. Your verbal warfare had created an opening rather splendidly, it seems."

".....Still, it's a rather deplorable tactic..."

The feverish Lyle said, as though he was sleep-talking.

".....Milla. Am I..... a prideful person...?"

"—Hmm, how should I put it."

Milla's eyes widened slightly, and while adjusting the blankets, she replied in a gentle voice.

"Probably so. You possess extraordinary talent, yet you have not accomplished anything with it—it's a waste, and various other criticisms come to mind as well."

".....Oh..."

"Regardless, it's fine to be thus, isn't it? Because *that* is something you would do, Master Lyle. At the very least, I do not disagree with it."

Milla added, with her heartfelt feelings.

If not for that prideful kindness, Lyle would surely be unstoppable. He would probably have become a 'machine'. In order to defeat Vilhelm, he would have perceived all humans as mere 'numerals' and 'calculations'. Lyle did not want that, and hence, out of his own will, he chose to live a carefree life.

Pride might have been too strong a word to describe it.

However, *that* included everything; Maria, Milla, Lyle loved all of them.

"Well..... I wish you would try and understand a woman's heart just a bit more, though."

It looked like the feverish Lyle did not hear that small whisper.

"Dear me..... At any rate, we have to cure that cold of yours first."

Said Milla, rummaging through her handbag. And from that, she took out a glass tube, filled with a transparent fluid. She removed the cap, and poured it into the currently feverish-and-moaning Lyle's mouth.

"Ngh..... Mgh! W-What the hell is thiiiiiiiiis!"

Right after a little mouthful, Lyle rolled around on the top of the bed. His face that was flushed red with fever, turned pale in a single instant.

"Geh! ...Ah, it tastes sweet, bitter, spicy, sour, salty, and a little fizzy..."

"It's a replenishment tonic that was passed down to me from my mother. In the southern archipelago, they call it—the [Dead Raiser]."

"I-Indeed, it does have a taste that could even raise the dead..."

"Well, the real thing starts from now onwards."

Saying that, Milla produced a solid, bullet-shaped medicine.

"The [Dead Raiser] comes in a set of two parts."

"A-A set of two..."

"Yes. Of course, this one is a suppository."

With an innocent smile, Milla rolled up the sleeves of her maid uniform.

"Now then, Master Lyle, please keep still obediently and let me insert this rectally."

"I-I think I'll be fine with just the first half..."

"That will not do. Your face is still ghastly pale, isn't it?"

"T-That's because of the medicine..."

"You have to know when to give it up, Master Lyle. Now—please surrender and relax yourself."

With a splendid smile like that of a sunflower in full bloom, Milla sidled up to Lyle.

### Part 2

".....And with that, I'm done."

Finally done with the cleaning up of the laboratory after a few days, Lunaria heaved a sigh of relief.

Sitting down on the sofa, she heard a clanging sound from the area around her feet.

"....."

Lunaria took out <Dainsleif>, which had been crammed beneath the sofa.

The students of Vergenheim who had been manipulated by Vilhelm Zest, had been already released from the magic of 'Puppetry' and returned to their normal lives. Though they had lost the memory of their manipulation, they readily returned to normal, probably due to how unrestrained and easy-going they were.

The magic sword of the «Nosferatu» that was passed down in the Nebulablut—was all but useless, now that Lunaria was the only last remaining Nebulablut. There was even the possibility of it bringing chaos into human society, were someone like Vilhelm happen to use it for their own gain.

*"It's fine, isn't it."*

Lyle had said, while feverish and faint.

*"If there was but one thing that had been accomplished in the incident this time round, it would be that we had taken back that sword. If you had told me to dispose of it, I'd be even more worried than you."*

Just as she thought, he did not give any reasoning, like that it was for Lunaria's sake. It was to the point of being shocking—no, to the point of making her feel angry.

".....Father, Mother, Elder Sister..... I intend to stay by his side."

Stroking the sheathed <Dainsleif>, Lunaria whispered quietly.

"Perhaps it was fate that led the last surviving Nebulablut to him."

Her own powerlessness was not yet cleared away. However, she thought that she would be able to accept it.

Powerless and worthless, yet she was proud to stand as one of the Nebulablut. She was the last of that lineage—and so, she would see it with her very own eyes.

The «Disciple of the Last Hexe» who lived on the threshold of magic and science—she would see his future with her own eyes.

Perhaps if she were to find the meaning in her survival, that would probably have been the answer.

"No... that was what I decided. By myself..... Will you forgive me?"

There would be no reply—that should have been how it was,

"There's no problem with that, is there?"

A voice said.

Lunaria looked up, and found Maria standing at the door, which had been left open.

"Lady Mar—"

"It's just 'Maria'... you cleaned the room up pretty well, I see."

Maria entered the room while looking around.

".....It was seven years ago."

Said Maria, as though she was engaging in gossip.

"I used to be a complete tomboy. Because of how uptight it was, being a noble's daughter, I took it out on the kids in the neighbourhood, and acted as their big boss."

Lunaria's head was tilted to the side, not quite understanding the conversation that had abruptly been started, but Maria continued to speak.

"One day, I started saying something about a test of courage, and went on an adventure. One of my friends, a girl, got injured pretty badly. It was in the middle of a dark forest. She had fallen down and hit her head on a sharp rock, and started bleeding profusely, but she wasn't afraid. She just stood up, while everyone was dumfounded. Do you know what I was thinking then?"

"You were worried for her—"

"*The adults will be mad at me.* That was the first thought that popped into my mind."

"That..."

"It couldn't be helped, since you were a child then'? However, the fact that I was a coward does not change. Just thinking about it makes me feel like puking, eh. The first person who took action in that situation was Lyle. He went up to the injured girl, and with the amber he had hidden and brought along—he used magic."

That was the time when Maria had first found out about Lyle's secret.

The girl was given emergency treatment with Lyle's magic, and then, under his leadership, everyone returned to the village.

"Everyone was deeply grateful to him, for saving the girl. However, as the days passed... his friends from the village slowly avoided him more and more. It's only natural, right? In the midst of the <Steam Engine Revolution>, a remarkable development in the history of science, it was common knowledge that magic was dodgy and demonic. And right after that, Lyle moved to the royal capital."

Because of how sudden it had been, Maria only learnt that he had moved away after it happened.



The next time they met each other had been a while later, in the royal capital.

The young Maria had felt that it was inexcusable of her to have caused Lyle to be driven out of his home, but above all else, she was frightened of the secret that her childhood friend, whom she thought she knew, had.

"At that time, I wanted to run away from it all. But Lyle... he told me that it was alright. And then, he said that—"

*"I regret nothing. After all, I managed to save her. I saved her life. And so, I do not regret it. The one you should be worried about is her, not me."*

Those words were nothing like what a ten-year-old boy would say. To someone at that age, losing your friends should have been devastating. Yet he said that he regretted nothing. He completely did not deny Maria's guilt, and was even considerate of her.

".....Is that the 'secret'?"

"Yeah. That is my most important secret."

His expression seemed lonely, yet Lyle had still puffed out his chest, held his head high, and cleared away the pessimism which had hardened within Maria's heart.

It was then, that Maria Highline had fallen in love with Lyle Waldstein.

"But... why did you tell me such an important memory?"

"I promised to, didn't I? If I 'fessed up, then it wouldn't be fair for you to keep quiet as well, would it? And furthermore... Vilhelm was right, on some of the things he said."

"?"

"Like, 'If you do not seek compensation for your kindness, then what is it, but pride?'"

Maria smiled bitterly, looking downcast.

"Lyle, fundamentally, does not rely on others. For example, he had come up with the Ingenious Engine. What others cannot do, he can. What others do not know, he does. Even when he thinks about helping others, he does not think about receiving help from them."

"Is that why he calls it 'hypocrisy'...?"

"Yeah. Essentially, Lyle probably does not need anybody."

"....."

Lunaria fell into silence.

Maria's words were biting in her appraisal of the target of her goodwill. Hence—Lunaria waited for Maria to continue.

"That's why—that's precisely why I was so fired up."

As Lunaria predicted, Maria had a defiant smile.

"Because Lyle is that kind of guy, I wanted to *affix a reason to his kindness*—I wanted to make him acknowledge me, that was what I thought, don't you think so?"

"—Yes."

Lunaria nodded.

She thought it was unfair. She felt vexed, that she was the only one who had her feelings turned upside down.

She wanted to see it with her own eyes—that was the reason she had decided to *remain by his side*.

"Yeah. I don't know if this is the right way to put it... but I felt like he was a 'kindred spirit' to me."

"A 'kindred spirit'...?"

"We were fighting against the same things, you see."

Saying that, Maria smiled cheerfully.

".....I do not quite understand, as I lack such experiences....."

Lunaria felt a certain pressure on her chest, and continued to speak, to confirm something.

"Does a 'kindred spirit' mean... a 'friend'?"

"Well, they're roughly the same."

"For me... this is the first time that I've made a friend."

"Hmm? Well then, doesn't that mean you've had a lot of new experiences?"

"?"

"Making your first friend, your first comrade—and your first rival."

Without blinking, Lunaria looked intently at the copper-haired girl.

".....You really are an impressive girl."

"Well, at the very least, you can go ahead and think that."

She, who was always being teased by her maid, brushed her copper-coloured hair upwards.

".....Thank you."

Lunaria bowed her head. And then, she looked right back into Maria's eyes.

".....I will be needing your guidance, from now and onwards."

"Yeah. The same goes for me—until I *make Lyle fall in love with me*, that is."

The two girls exchanged bold smiles with each other.

It was just then.

\*Batan\*!

"Lyle?"

"Master Lyle?"

The girls stared in wonder, at Lyle who had jumped into the laboratory.

Only earlier was he groaning from his fever, but the Lyle then was out of breath, an overcoat over his body, and his pale face had not a trace of the fever.

".....Ah, no need to be alarmed. I'm almost fully recovered..... I think."

For some reason Lyle was rubbing his bottom, as he explained.

"Hmm? Oh, whatever."

"Since you have come all the way here already, please lie down and have a rest."

".....Somehow, it looks like the atmosphere between the two of you has changed."

"Is that so?"

"Might it be your imagination?"

Ignoring Lyle's confused look, Maria and Lunaria, as though they had conspired beforehand, each took one of Lyle's arms, dragging him to the sofa in the middle of the room.

".....Did something happen, after all?"

"Who knows?"

Answered the two of them in unison as they feigned innocence. Lyle's expression grew increasingly confused.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Of course I do, why wouldn't I?"

Lyle nodded, as though it was obvious.

"If my mental health suffers, it'll be difficult to even recover from a common cold, y'know."

At Lyle's words, the two of them exchanged glances, and said,

"—Too bad for you, it's a 'secret' between us."

".....Please give up on that notion."

Maria's smile was impish, while Lunaria's seemed sarcastic, and they giggled.

Lyle pursed his lips, as if to pout, seeing their responses.

Looking at Lyle, the girls smiled even more.

The maidens' laughter could be heard in the room of the «Disciple of the Last Hexe», from then and on.

*<Disciple of the Last Hexe>*

*Fin*



***Afterword – The Monologue On The Isle of Monologues***

You there, the one currently reading this afterword. Please try taking off your obi<sup>1</sup>.

Eh? Eeh? I was referring to the book cover, that obi. Once you take it off,

*white thighs will be uncovered from those torn black stockings!*

They're hiding something, my favourite piece of clothing... but I also like those garter belts which are worn at their end just as much.

—Oh, that reminds me. Speaking of garter belts,

“Garter belts are great, aren't they?”

“I agree. When those wild high-class ladies roll up their skirts and then you see a Derringer there, things like that, eh.”

“Awesome, isn't it—yep, that kind of feeling.”

...Can you believe me? It really is that sort of feeling, right?

Anyway, I managed to finish writing a story where cute girls *fight for the affection of a naive boy while still getting along with each other*.

The white girl (black stockings) and the red girl (garter belt) are trying their best, it gives off such a lukewarm feeling, just like those maid characters from other novels ~ so please give them all your support and love.

Spring of 2012, Haneda Daisuke.

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<sup>1</sup> Obi can mean the sash of a kimono, or the cover of a book.

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